

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS

MARCH,
25¢

PLANET stories

A hooded war-lord leads
the hordes of Mekk
against the Ancient Deem.

BLACK AMAZON of MARS

A Novel of Warrior Worlds
by LEIGH BRACKETT



THE STAR-SAINT by A. E. VAN VOGT

FYFE LLUN • ANDERSON

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 4, NO. 11 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • MARCH, 1951

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BLACK AMAZON OF MARS Leigh Brackett 72

Grimly Eric John Stark slogged toward that ancient Martian city—with every step he cursed the talisman of Ban Cruach that flamed in his bloodstained belt. Behind him screamed the hordes of Ciaran, hungering for that magic jewel—ahead lay the dread abode of the Ice Creatures—at his side strode the whispering spectre of Ban Cruach, urging him on to a battle Stark knew he must lose!

► *Two Space-Adventure Novelets*

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Mark Ragan could travel the airless Vold without spaceships. He would answer an appeal for help from anywhere in the Galaxy—if it interested him. And he had a strange talent for dealing with alien life-forms—such as the terrible, invisible Destroyer that stalked eight-hundred colonists on far-off Ariel . . .

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Entoré, a creature not yet born, and Bryan Barret, rebel, radical, diversifal—together they worked to prevent a world of probability that would destroy the human race! © 1945 by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc.

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T. T. SCOTT, President

JEROME BIXBY, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, General Manager

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THE VIZIGRAPH

A letter column is for letters; so we'll just say "Hi," name the pic-award winners—1) De Weese; 2) Chabot; 3) Ganley—and git along. Happy New Year!

J. B.

BEMS OF DISTINCTION

Box 493,
Lyn Haven, Fla.

BROTHER BIXBY:

It was with trepidation that I knocked on the door. There being no reply, I knocked again—this time, with my knuckles. I steeled myself as I heard sounds within...

This had been a harrowing day, but at last I was nearly thru. This would be the final call. The thing opened the door and we exchanged a few whispered words. With a relieved sigh and a hurried "Thank you," I jotted some figures in my notebook and scurried away. That proved it! Yes, that proved it. In a dimension-wide interview, 9 out of 10 prominent Bems said they read *PLANET STORIES* more than any other mag! Yes, more Bems read *PLANET* than ever before! (Musical background and a chorus singing: P—L, A—N, E—T!) All join in for:

PLANET STORIES hits the spot—

Six a year now, that's a lot—

Two thin dimes is all you need—

PLANET STORIES is the mag to read!

(Editor's revision:

Two thin dimes, and a nickel too—

Planet Stories is the mag for you!)

Yes, it is; and I did! The Nov. ish, to be precise. And good it was, too. *MITKEY RIDES AGAIN* was nearly as good as *STAR MOUSE*, which was a pleasant surprise. Too often, with sequels, that just ain't so. But just one thing—if *Mitkey's* intelligence returned once without the machine, why

not again? His, and Whitey's, too. Hmmmmm?

La Vizi brought up some good epistles this time, but I picked out three that seemed most worthy—hand out the pix to 1) Hapke 2) Gibson 3) (for no other reason than the vagaries of my mind) Asimov. With an 's'...

By the way—I think *CARRY ME HOME* was as good as *MITKEY*, putting the two of 'em on top.

All the shorts were good, genuine spacepics, pleasing me no end.

Hmmm... Pardon me, but didn't you drop *PS's* Feature Flash for a while? If so, glad to see it back. And now, why not radiate a recall for Guy Gifford's *Ringers*?

And please, pretty please with stardust on it, please stop those Adam and Eve endings! I can stand the post-atom Adam and Eve idea much better than just one after another explanation of how the original pair got here.

Now, briefly, the illos:

McWilliams, *McWilliams*, *McWILLIAMS*! (A slight hint that I want an artist named M, c, W, i, double l, i, a, m, s!) It isn't that I don't like Mayan, but I prefer and want more, *more of*—Oh, yes, it is kinda repetitious... Anyhoo, you now know who I mean...

Vestal! Artist Vestal, please step to the rear of the class. Who, may I ask, ever heard of a rocket with pistons? Ain't yo' momma done tole you that pistons are used in internal combustion engines? There's—well—a slight difference...

Now to go back to my canvassing. I've got to see some flying cupcakes about how *PS* suits their T zone—T for thrills, T for thud (as in thud and blunder) and T for Terra...

Cerely,

SHELBY VICK

(Continued on p. 15)

BE STRONG!

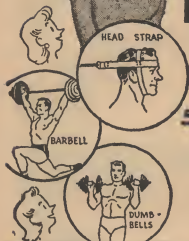


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Wearily, Kreega scrambled up on top of the rock and crouched there . . .

duel on SYRTIS

by POUL ANDERSON

Bold and ruthless, he was famed throughout the System as a big-game hunter. From the firedrakes of Mercury to the ice-crawlers of Pluto, he'd slain them all. But his trophy-room lacked one item; and now Riordan swore he'd bag the forbidden game that roamed the red deserts . . .
a Martian!

THE NIGHT WHISPERED THE message. Over the many miles of loneliness it was borne, carried on the wind, rustled by the half-sentient lichens and the dwarfed trees, murmured from one to another of the little creatures that huddled under crags, in caves, by shadowy dunes. In no words, but in a dim pulsing of dread which echoed through Kreega's brain, the warning ran—
They are hunting again.

Kreega shuddered in a sudden blast of wind. The night was enormous around him, above him, from the iron bitterness of the hills to the wheeling, glittering constellations light-years over his head. He reached out with his trembling perceptions, tuning himself to the brush and the wind and the small burrowing things underfoot, letting the night speak to him.

Alone, alone. There was not another Martian for a hundred miles of emptiness. There were only the tiny animals and the shivering brush and the thin, sad blowing of the wind.

The voiceless scream of dying traveled through the brush, from plant to plant, echoed by the fear-pulses of the animals and the ringingly reflecting cliffs. They were curling, shriveling and blackening as the rocket poured the glowing death down on them, and the withering veins and nerves cried to the stars.

Kreega huddled against a tall gaunt crag. His eyes were like yellow moons in the darkness, cold with terror and hate and a slowly gathering resolution. Grimly, he estimated that the death was being sprayed in a circle some ten miles across. And he was trapped in it, and soon the hunter would come after him.

He looked up to the indifferent glitter of stars, and a shudder went along his body. Then he sat down and began to think.

IT HAD STARTED a few days before, in the private office of the trader Wisby.

"I came to Mars," said Riordan, "to get me an owlie."

Wisby had learned the value of a poker face. He peered across the rim of his glass at the other man, estimating him.

Even in God-forsaken holes like Port Armstrong one had heard of Riordan. Heir to a million-dollar shipping firm which he himself had pyramided into a System-wide monster, he was equally well known as a big game hunter. From the firedrakes of Mercury to the ice crawlers of Pluto, he'd bagged them all. Except, of course, a Martian. That particular game was forbidden now.

He sprawled in his chair, big and strong and ruthless, still a young man. He

dwarfed the unkempt room with his size and the hard-held dynamo strength in him, and his cold green gaze dominated the trader.

"It's illegal, you know," said Wisby. "It's a twenty-year sentence if you're caught at it."

"Bah! The Martian Commissioner is at Ares, halfway round the planet. If we go at it right, who's ever to know?" Riordan gulped at his drink. "I'm well aware that in another year or so they'll have tightened up enough to make it impossible. This is the last chance for any man to get an owlie. That's why I'm here."

Wisby hesitated, looking out the window. Port Armstrong was no more than a dusty huddle of domes, interconnected by tunnels, in a red waste of sand stretching to the near horizon. An Earthman in airsuit and transparent helmet was walking down the street and a couple of Martians were lounging against a wall. Otherwise nothing—a silent, deadly monotony brooding under the shrunken sun. Life on Mars was not especially pleasant for a human.

"You're not falling into this owlie-loving that's corrupted all Earth?" demanded Riordan contemptuously.

"Oh, no," said Wisby. "I keep them in their place around my post. But times are changing. It can't be helped."

"There was a time when they were slaves," said Riordan. "Now those old women on Earth want to give 'em the vote." He snorted.

"Well, times are changing," repeated Wisby mildly. "When the first humans landed on Mars a hundred years ago, Earth had just gone through the Hemispheric Wars. The worst wars man had ever known. They damned near wrecked the old ideas of liberty and equality. People were suspicious and tough—they'd had to be, to survive. They weren't able to—empathize the Martians, or whatever you call it. Not able to think of them as anything but intelligent animals. And Martians made such useful slaves—they need so little food or heat or oxygen, they can even live fifteen minutes or so without breathing at all. And the wild Martians made fine sport—intelligent game, that

could get away as often as not, or even manage to kill the hunter."

"I know," said Riordan. "That's why I want to hunt one. It's no fun if the game doesn't have a chance."

"It's different now," went on Wisby. "Earth has been at peace for a long time. The liberals have gotten the upper hand. Naturally, one of their first reforms was to end Martian slavery."

Riordan swore. The forced repatriation of Martians working on his spaceships had cost him plenty. "I haven't time for your philosophizing," he said. "If you can arrange for me to get a Martian, I'll make it worth your while."

"How much worth it?" asked Wisby.

THEY HAGGLED for a while before settling on a figure. Riordan had brought guns and a small rocketboat, but Wisby would have to supply radioactive material, a "hawk," and a rockhound. Then he had to be paid for the risk of legal action, though that was small. The final price came high.

"Now, where do I get my Martian?" inquired Riordan. He gestured at the two in the street. "Catch one of them and release him in the desert?"

It was Wisby's turn to be contemptuous. "One of them? Hah! Town loungers! A city dweller from Earth would give you a better fight."

The Martians didn't look impressive. They stood only some four feet high on skinny, claw-footed legs, and the arms, ending in bony four-fingered hands, were stringy. The chests were broad and deep, but the waists were ridiculously narrow. They were viviparous, warm-blooded, and suckled their young, but gray feathers covered their hides. The round, hook-beaked heads, with huge amber eyes and tufted feather ears, showed the origin of the name "owlie." They wore only pouched belts and carried sheath knives; even the liberals of Earth weren't ready to allow the natives modern tools and weapons. There were too many old grudges.

"The Martians always were good fighters," said Riordan. "They wiped out quite a few Earth settlements in the old days."

"The wild ones," agreed Wisby. "But

not these. They're just stupid laborers, as dependent on our civilization as we are. You want a real old timer, and I know where one's to be found."

He spread a map on the desk. "See, here in the Hraefnuian Hills, about a hundred miles from here. These Martians live a long time, maybe two centuries, and this fellow Kreega has been around since the first Earthmen came. He led a lot of Martian raids in the early days, but since the general amnesty and peace he's lived all alone up there, in one of the old ruined towers. A real old-time warrior who hates Earthmen's guts. He comes here once in a while with furs and minerals to trade, so I know a little about him." Wisby's eyes gleamed savagely. "You'll be doing us all a favor by shooting the arrogant bastard. He struts around here as if the place belonged to him. And he'll give you a run for your money."

Riordan's massive dark head nodded in satisfaction.

THE MAN had a bird and a rockhound. That was bad. Without them, Kreega could lose himself in the labyrinth of caves and canyons and scrubby thickets—but the hound could follow his scent and the bird could spot him from above.

To make matters worse, the man had landed near Kreega's tower. The weapons were all there—now he was cut off, unarmed and alone save for what feeble help the desert life could give. Unless he could double back to the place somehow—but meanwhile he had to survive.

He sat in a cave, looking down past a tortured wilderness of sand and bush and wind-carved rock, miles in the thin clear air to the glitter of metal where the rocket lay. The man was a tiny speck in the huge barren landscape, a lonely insect crawling under the deep-blue sky. Even by day, the stars glistened in the tenuous atmosphere. Weak pallid sunlight spilled over rocks tawny and ochereous and rust-red, over the low dusty thorn-bushes and the gnarled little trees and the sand that blew faintly between them. Equatorial Mars!

Lonely or not, the man had a gun that could spang death clear to the horizon, and he had his beasts, and there would be

a radio in the rocketboat for calling his fellows. And the glowing death ringed them in, a charmed circle which Kreega could not cross without bringing a worse death on himself than the rifle would give—

Or was there a worse death than that—to be shot by a monster and have his stuffed hide carried back as a trophy for fools to gape at? The old iron pride of his race rose in Kreega, hard and bitter and unrelenting. He didn't ask much of life these days—solitude in his tower to think the long thoughts of a Martian and create the small exquisite artworks which he loved; the company of his kind at the Gathering Season, grave ancient ceremony and acrid merriment and the chance to beget and rear sons; an occasional trip to the Earthling settling for the metal goods and the wine which were the only valuable things they had brought to Mars; a vague dream of raising his folk to a place where they could stand as equals before all the universe. No more. And now they would take even this from him!

He rasped a curse on the human and resumed his patient work, chipping a spearhead for what puny help it could give him. The brush rustled dryly in alarm, tiny hidden animals squeaked their terror, the desert shouted to him of the monster that strode toward his cave. But he didn't have to flee right away.

* * *

Riordan sprayed the heavy-metal isotope in a ten-mile circle around the old tower. He did that by night, just in case patrol craft might be snooping around. But once he had landed, he was safe—he could always claim to be peacefully exploring, hunting leapers or some such thing.

The radioactive had a half-life of about four days, which meant that it would be unsafe to approach for some three weeks—two at the minimum. That was time enough, when the Martian was boxed in so small an area.

There was no danger that he would try to cross it. The owlies had learned what

radioactivity meant, back when they fought the humans. And their vision, extending well into the ultra-violet, made it directly visible to them through its fluorescence—to say nothing of the wholly unhuman extra senses they had. No, Kreega would try to hide, and perhaps to fight, and eventually he'd be cornered.

Still, there was no use taking chances. Riordan set a timer on the boat's radio. If he didn't come back within two weeks to turn it off, it would emit a signal which Wisby would hear, and he'd be rescued.

He checked his other equipment. He had an airsuit designed for Martian conditions, with a small pump operated by a power-beam from the boat to compress the atmosphere sufficiently for him to breathe it. The same unit recovered enough water from his breath so that the weight of supplies for several days was, in Martian gravity, not too great for him to bear. He had a .45 rifle built to shoot in Martian air, that was heavy enough for his purposes. And, of course, compass and binoculars and sleeping bag. Pretty light equipment, but he preferred a minimum anyway.

For ultimate emergencies there was the little tank of suspensine. By turning a valve, he could release it into his air system. The gas didn't exactly induce suspended animation, but it paralyzed efferent nerves and slowed the overall metabolism to a point where a man could live for weeks on one lungful of air. It was useful in surgery, and had saved the life of more than one interplanetary explorer whose oxygen system went awry. But Riordan didn't expect to have to use it. He certainly hoped he wouldn't. It would be tedious to lie fully conscious for days waiting for the automatic signal to call Wisby.

He stepped out of the boat and locked it. No danger that the owlie would break in if he should double back; it would take tordenite to crack that hull.

He whistled to his animals. They were native beasts, long ago domesticated by the Martians and later by man. The rockhound was like a gaunt wolf, but huge-breasted and feathered, a tracker as good as any Terrestrial bloodhound. The "hawk" had

less resemblance to its counterpart of Earth: it was a bird of prey, but in the tenuous atmosphere it needed a six-foot wingspread to lift its small body. Riordan was pleased with their training.

The hound bayed, a low quavering note which would have been muffled almost to inaudibility by the thin air and the man's plastic helmet had the suit not included microphones and amplifiers. It circled, sniffing, while the hawk rose into the alien sky.

Riordan did not look closely at the tower. It was a crumbling stump atop a rusty hill, unhuman and grotesque. Once, perhaps ten thousand years ago, the Martians had had a civilization of sorts, cities and agriculture and a neolithic technology. But according to their own traditions they had achieved a union or symbiosis with the wild life of the planet and had abandoned such mechanical aids as unnecessary. Riordan snorted.

The hound bayed again. The noise seemed to hang eerily in the still, cold air; to shiver from cliff and crag and die reluctantly under the enormous silence. But it was a bugle call, a haughty challenge to a world grown old—stand aside, make way, here comes the conqueror!

The animal suddenly loped forward. He had a scent. Riordan swung into a long, easy low-gravity stride. His eyes gleamed like green ice. The hunt was begun!

BREATH SOBBED in Kreega's lungs, hard and quick and raw. His legs felt weak and heavy, and the thudding of his heart seemed to shake his whole body.

Still he ran, while the frightful clamor rose behind him and the padding of feet grew ever nearer. Leaping, twisting, bounding from crag to crag, sliding down shaly ravines and slipping through clumps of trees, Kreega fled.

The hound was behind him and the hawk soaring overhead. In a day and a night they had driven him to this, running like a crazed leaper with death bay-ing at his heels—he had not imagined a human could move so fast or with such endurance.

The desert fought for him; the plants with their queer blind life that no Earth-

ling would ever understand were on his side. Their thorny branches twisted away as he darted through and then came back to rake the flanks of the hound, slow him—but they could not stop his brutal rush. He ripped past their strengthless clutching fingers and yammered on the trail of the Martian.

The human was toiling a good mile behind, but showed no sign of tiring. Still Kreega ran. He had to reach the cliff edge before the hunter saw him through his rifle sights—had to, had to, and the hound was snarling a yard behind now.

Up the long slope he went. The hawk fluttered, striking at him, seeking to lay beak and talons in his head. He batted at the creature with his spear and dodged around a tree. The tree snaked out a branch from which the hound rebounded, yelling till the rocks rang.

The Martian burst onto the edge of the cliff. It fell sheer to the canyon floor, five hundred feet of iron-streaked rock tumbling into windy depths. Beyond, the lowering sun glared in his eyes. He paused only an instant, etched black against the sky, a perfect shot if the human should come into view, and then he sprang over the edge.

He had hoped the rockhound would go shooting past, but the animal braked itself barely in time. Kreega went down the cliff face, clawing into every tiny crevice, shuddering as the age-worn rock crumbled under his fingers. The hawk swept close, hacking at him and screaming for its master. He couldn't fight it, not with every finger and toe needed to hang against shattering death, but—

He slid along the face of the precipice into a gray-green clump of vines, and his nerves thrilled forth the appeal of the ancient symbiosis. The hawk swooped again and he lay unmoving, rigid as if dead, until it cried in shrill triumph and settled on his shoulder to pluck out his eyes.

Then the vines stirred. They weren't strong, but their thorns sank into the flesh and it couldn't pull loose. Kreega toiled on down into the canyon while the vines pulled the hawk apart.

Riordan loomed hugely against the darkening sky. He fired, once, twice, the bul-

**Inside Front
Cover is
Missing**

lets humming wickedly close, but as shadows swept up from the depths the Martian was covered.

The man turned up his speech amplifier and his voice rolled and boomed monstrosously through the gathering night, thunder such as dry Mars had not heard for millennia: "Score one for you! But it isn't enough! I'll find you!"

The sun slipped below the horizon and night came down like a falling curtain. Through the darkness Kreega heard the man laughing. The old rocks trembled with his laughter.

RIORDAN was tired with the long chase and the niggling insufficiency of his oxygen supply. He wanted a smoke and hot food, and neither was to be had. Oh, well, he'd appreciate the luxuries of life all the more when he got home—with the Martian's skin.

He grinned as he made camp. The little fellow was a worthwhile quarry, that was for damn sure. He'd held out for two days now, in a little ten-mile circle of ground, and he'd even killed the hawk. But Riordan was close enough to him now so that the hound could follow his spoor, for Mars had no watercourses to break a trail. So it didn't matter.

He lay watching the splendid night of stars. It would get cold before long, unmercifully cold, but his sleeping bag was a good-enough insulator to keep him warm with the help of solar energy stored during the day by its Gergen cells. Mars was dark at night, its moons of little help—Phobos a hurtling speck, Deimos merely a bright star. Dark and cold and empty. The rockhound had burrowed into the loose sand nearby, but it would raise the alarm if the Martian should come sneaking near the camp. Not that that was likely—he'd have to find shelter somewhere too, if he didn't want to freeze.

The bushes and the trees and the little furtive animals whispered a word he could not hear, chattered and gossiped on the wind about the Martian who kept himself warm with work. But he didn't understand that language which was no language.

Drowsily, Riordan thought of past hunts. The big game of Earth, lion and tiger and

elephant and buffalo and sheep on the high sun-blazing peaks of the Rockies. Rain forests of Venus and the coughing roar of a many-legged swamp monster crashing through the trees to the place where he stood waiting. Primitive throb of drums in a hot wet night, chant of beaters dancing around a fire—scramble along the hell-plain of Mercury with a swollen sun licking against his puny insulating suit—the grandeur and desolation of Neptune's liquid-gas swamps and the huge blind thing that screamed and blundered after him—

But this was the loneliest and strangest and perhaps most dangerous hunt of all, and on that account the best. He had no malice toward the Martian; he respected the little being's courage as he respected the bravery of the other animals he had fought. Whatever trophy he brought home from this chase would be well earned.

The fact that his success would have to be treated discreetly didn't matter. He hunted less for the glory of it—though he had to admit he didn't mind the publicity—than for love. His ancestors had fought under one name or another—viking, Crusader, mercenary, rebel, patriot, whatever was fashionable at the moment. Struggle was in his blood, and in these degenerate days there was little to struggle against save what he hunted.

Well—tomorrow—he drifted off to sleep.

HE WOKE in the short gray dawn, made a quick breakfast, and whistled his hound to heel. His nostrils dilated with excitement, a high keen drunkenness that sang wonderfully within him. Today—maybe today!

They had to take a roundabout way down into the canyon and the hound cast about for an hour before he picked up the scent. Then the deep-voiced cry rose again and they were off—more slowly now, for it was a cruel stony trail.

The sun climbed high as they worked along the ancient river-bed. Its pale chill light washed needle-sharp crags and fantastically painted cliffs, shale and sand and the wreck of geological ages. The low harsh brush crunched under the man's feet, writhing and crackling its impotent pro-

test. Otherwise it was still, a deep and taut and somehow waiting stillness.

The hound shattered the quiet with an eager yelp and plunged forward. Hot scent! Riordan dashed after him, trampling through dense bush, panting and swearing and grinning with excitement.

Suddenly the brush opened underfoot. With a howl of dismay, the hound slid down the sloping wall of the pit it had covered. Riordan flung himself forward with tigerish swiftness, flat down on his belly with one hand barely catching the animal's tail. The shock almost pulled him into the hole too. He wrapped one arm around a bush that clawed at his helmet and pulled the hound back.

Shaking, he peered into the trap. It had been well made—about twenty feet deep, with walls as straight and narrow as the sand would allow, and skillfully covered with brush. Planted in the bottom were three wicked-looking flint spears. Had he been a shade less quick in his reactions, he would have lost the hound and perhaps himself.

He skinned his teeth in a wolf-grin and looked around. The owlie must have worked all night on it. Then he couldn't be far away—and he'd be very tired—

As if to answer his thoughts, a boulder crashed down from the nearer cliff wall. It was a monster, but a falling object on Mars has less than half the acceleration it does on Earth. Riordan scrambled aside as it boomed onto the place where he had been lying.

"Come on!" he yelled, and plunged toward the cliff.

For an instant a gray form loomed over the edge, hurled a spear at him. Riordan snapped a shot at it, and it vanished. The spear glanced off the tough fabric of his suit and he scrambled up a narrow ledge to the top of the precipice.

The Martian was nowhere in sight, but a faint red trail led into the rugged hill country. *Winged him, by God!* The hound was slower in negotiating the shale-covered trail; his own feet were bleeding when he came up. Riordan cursed him and they set out again.

They followed the trail for a mile or two and then it ended. Riordan looked

around the wilderness of trees and needles which blocked view in any direction. Obviously the owlie had backtracked and climbed up one of those rocks, from which he could take a flying leap to some other point. But which one?

Sweat which he couldn't wipe off ran down the man's face and body. He itched intolerably, and his lungs were raw from gasping at his dole of air. But still he laughed in gusty delight. What a chase! What a chase!

KREEGA lay in the shadow of a tall rock and shuddered with weariness. Beyond the shade, the sunlight danced in what to him was a blinding, intolerable dazzle, hot and cruel and life-hungry, hard and bright as the metal of the conquerors.

It had been a mistake to spend priceless hours when he might have been resting working on that trap. It hadn't worked, and he might have known that it wouldn't. And now he was hungry, and thirst was like a wild beast in his mouth and throat, and still they followed him.

They weren't far behind now. All this day they had been dogging him; he had never been more than half an hour ahead. No rest, no rest, a devil's hunt through a tormented wilderness of stone and sand, and now he could only wait for the battle with an iron burden of exhaustion laid on him.

The wound in his side burned. It wasn't deep, but it had cost him blood and pain and the few minutes of catnapping he might have snatched.

For a moment, the warrior Kreega was gone and a lonely, frightened infant sobbed in the desert silence. *Why can't they let me alone?*

A low, dusty-green bush rustled. A sand-runner piped in one of the ravines. They were getting close.

Warily, Kreega scrambled up on top of the rock and crouched low. He had backtracked to it; they should by rights go past him toward his tower.

He could see it from here, a low yellow ruin worn by the winds of millennia. There had only been time to dart in, snatch a bow and a few arrows and an axe. Pitiful weapons—the arrows could not penetrate

the Earthman's suit when there was only a Martian's thin grasp to draw the bow, and even with a steel head the ax was a small and feeble thing. But it was all he had, he and his few little allies of a desert which fought only to keep its solitude.

Repatriated slaves had told him of the Earthlings' power. Their roaring machines filled the silence of their own deserts, gouged the quiet face of their own moon, shook the planets with a senseless fury of meaningless energy. They were the conquerors, and it never occurred to them that an ancient peace and stillness could be worth preserving.

Well—he fitted an arrow to the string and crouched in the silent, flimmering sunlight, waiting.

The hound came first, yelping and howling. Kreega drew the bow as far as he could. But the human had to come near first—

There he came, running and bounding over the rocks, rifle in hand and restless eyes shining with taut green light, closing in for the death. Kreega swung softly around. The beast was beyond the rock now, the Earthman almost below it.

The bow twanged. With a savage thrill, Kreega saw the arrow go through the hound, saw the creature leap in the air and then roll over and over, howling and biting at the thing in its breast.

Like a gray thunderbolt, the Martian launched himself off the rock, down at the human. If his ax could shatter that helmet—

He struck the man and they went down together. Wildly, the Martian hewed. The ax glanced off the plastic—he hadn't had room for a swing. Riordan roared and lashed out with a fist. Retching, Kreega rolled backward.

Riordan snapped a shot at him. Kreega turned and fled. The man got to one knee, sighting carefully on the gray form that streaked up the nearest slope.

A little sandsnake darted up the man's leg and wrapped about his wrist. Its small strength was just enough to pull the gun aside. The bullet screamed past Kreega's ear as he vanished into a cleft.

He felt the thin death-agony of the snake as the man pulled it loose and

crushed it underfoot. Somewhat later, he heard a dull boom echoing between the hills. The man had gotten explosives from his boat and blown up the tower.

He had lost ax and bow. Now he was utterly weaponless, without even a place to retire for a last stand. And the hunter would not give up. Even without his animals, he would follow, more slowly but as relentlessly as before.

Kreega collapsed on a shelf of rock. Dry sobbing racked his thin body, and the sunset wind cried with him.

Presently he looked up, across a red and yellow immensity to the low sun. Long shadows were creeping over the land, peace and stillness for a brief moment before the iron cold of night closed down. Somewhere the soft trill of a sandrunner echoed between low wind-worn cliffs, and the brush began to speak, whispering back and forth in its ancient wordless tongue.

The desert, the planet and its wind and sand under the high cold stars, the clean open land of silence and loneliness and a destiny which was not man's, spoke to him. The enormous oneness of life on Mars, drawn together against the cruel environment, stirred in his blood. As the sun went down and the stars blossomed forth in awesome frosty glory, Kreega began to think again.

He did not hate his persecutor, but the grimness of Mars was in him. He fought the war of all which was old and primitive and lost in its own dreams against the alien and the desecrator. It was as ancient and pitiless as life, that war, and each battle won or lost meant something even if no one ever heard of it.

You do not fight alone, whispered the desert. *You fight for all Mars, and we are with you.*

Something moved in the darkness, a tiny warm form running across his hand, a little feathered mouse-like thing that burrowed under the sand and lived its small fugitive life and was glad in its own way of living. But it was a part of a world, and Mars has no pity in its voice.

Still, a tenderness was within Kreega's heart, and he whispered gently in the language that was not a language, *You will do this for us? You will do it, little brother?*

RIORDAN was too tired to sleep well. He had lain awake for a long time, thinking, and that is not good for a man alone in the Martian hills.

So now the rockhound was dead too. It didn't matter, the owlie wouldn't escape. But somehow the incident brought home to him the immensity and the age and the loneliness of the desert.

It whispered to him. The brush rustled and something wailed in darkness and the wind blew with a wild mournful sound over faintly starlit cliffs, and it was as if they all somehow had voice, as if the whole world muttered and threatened him in the night. Dimly, he wondered if man would ever subdue Mars, if the human race had not finally run across something bigger than itself.

But that was nonsense. Mars was old and worn-out and barren, dreaming itself into slow death. The tramp of human feet, shouts of men and roar of sky-storming rockets, were waking it, but to a new destiny, to man's. When Ares lifted its hard spires above the hills of Syrtis, where then were the ancient gods of Mars?

It was cold, and the cold deepened as the night wore on. The stars were fire and ice, glittering diamonds in the deep crystal dark. Now and then he could hear a faint snapping borne through the earth as rock or tree split open. The wind laid itself to rest, sound froze to death, there was only the hard clear starlight falling through space to shatter on the ground.

Once something stirred. He woke from a restless sleep and saw a small thing skittering toward him. He groped for the rifle beside his sleeping bag, then laughed harshly. It was only a sandmouse. But it proved that the Martian had no chance of sneaking up on him while he rested.

He didn't laugh again. The sound had echoed too hollowly in his helmet.

With the clear bitter dawn he was up. He wanted to get the hunt over with. He was dirty and unshaven inside the unit, sick of iron rations pushed through the airlock, stiff and sore with exertion. Lacking the hound, which he'd had to shoot, tracking would be slow, but he didn't want to go back to Port Armstrong for another. No, hell take that Martian, he'd have

the devil's skin soon!

Breakfast and a little moving made him feel better. He looked with a practiced eye for the Martian's trail. There was sand and brush over everything, even the rocks had a thin coating of their own erosion. The owlie couldn't cover his tracks perfectly—if he tried, it would slow him too much. Riordan fell into a steady jog.

Noon found him on higher ground, rough hills with gaunt needles of rock reaching yards into the sky. He kept going, confident of his own ability to wear down the quarry. He'd run deer to earth back home, day after day until the animal's heart broke and it waited quivering for him to come.

The trail looked clear and fresh now. He tensed with the knowledge that the Martian couldn't be far away.

Too clear! Could this be bait for another trap? He hefted the rifle and proceeded more warily. But no, there wouldn't have been time—

He mounted a high ridge and looked over the grim, fantastic landscape. Near the horizon he saw a blackened strip, the border of his radioactive barrier. The Martian couldn't go further, and if he doubled back Riordan would have an excellent chance of spotting him.

He tuned up his speaker and let his voice roar into the stillness: "Come out, owlie! I'm going to get you, you might as well come out now and be done with it!"

The echoes took it up, flying back and forth between the naked crags, trembling and shivering under the brassy arch of sky. *Come out, come out, come out—*

The Martian seemed to appear from thin air, a gray ghost rising out of the jumbled stones and standing poised not twenty feet away. For an instant, the shock of it was too much; Riordan gaped in disbelief. Kreega waited, quivering ever so faintly as if he were a mirage.

Then the man shouted and lifted his rifle. Still the Martian stood there as if carved in gray stone, and with a shock of disappointment Riordan thought that he had, after all, decided to give himself to an inevitable death.

Well, it had been a good hunt. "So

long," whispered Riordan, and squeezed the trigger.

Since the sandmouse had crawled into the barrel, the gun exploded.

RIORDAN heard the roar and saw the barrel peel open like a rotten banana. He wasn't hurt, but as he staggered back from the shock Kreega lunged at him.

The Martian was four feet tall, and skinny and weaponless, but he hit the Earthling like a small tornado. His legs wrapped around the man's waist and his hands got to work on the airhose.

Riordan went down under the impact. He snarled, tigerishly, and fastened his hands on the Martian's narrow throat. Kreega snapped futilely at him with his beak. They rolled over in a cloud of dust. The brush began to chatter excitedly.

Riordan tried to break Kreega's neck—the Martian twisted away, bored in again.

With a shock of horror, the man heard the hiss of escaping air as Kreega's beak and fingers finally worried the airhose loose. An automatic valve clamped shut, but there was no connection with the pump now—

Riordan cursed, and got his hands about the Martian's throat again. Then he simply lay there, squeezing, and not all Kreega's writhing and twistings could break that grip.

Riordan smiled sleepily and held his hands in place. After five minutes or so Kreega was still. Riordan kept right on throttling him for another five minutes, just to make sure. Then he let go and fumbled at his back, trying to reach the pump.

The air in his suit was hot and foul. He couldn't quite reach around to connect the hose to the pump—

Poor design, he thought vaguely. But then, these airtsuits weren't meant for battle armor.

He looked at the slight, silent form of the Martian. A faint breeze ruffled the gray feathers. What a fighter the little guy had been! He'd be the pride of the trophy room, back on Earth.

Let's see now—He unrolled his sleeping bag and spread it carefully out. He'd never make it to the rocket with what

air he had, so it was necessary to let the suspensine into his suit. But he'd have to get inside the bag, lest the nights freeze his blood solid.

He crawled in, fastening the flaps carefully, and opened the valve on the suspensine tank. Lucky he had it—but then, a good hunter thinks of everything. He'd get awfully bored, lying here till Wisby caught the signal in ten days or so and came to find him, but he'd last. It would be an experience to remember. In this dry air, the Martian's skin would keep perfectly well.

He felt the paralysis creep up on him, the waning of heartbeat and lung action. His senses and mind were still alive, and he grew aware that complete relaxation has its unpleasant aspects. Oh, well—he'd won. He'd killed the wiliest game with his own hands.

Presently Kreega sat up. He felt himself gingerly. There seemed to be a rib broken—well, that could be fixed. He was still alive. He'd been choked for a good ten minutes, but a Martian can last fifteen without air.

He opened the sleeping bag and got Riordan's keys. Then he limped slowly back to the rocket. A day or two of experimentation taught him how to fly it. He'd go to his kinsmen near Syrtis. Now that they had an Earthly machine, and Earthly weapons to copy—

But there was other business first. He didn't hate Riordan, but Mars is a hard world. He went back and dragged the Earthling into a cave and hid him beyond all possibility of human search parties finding him.

For a while he looked into the man's eyes. Horror stared dumbly back at him. He spoke slowly, in halting English: "For those you killed, and for being a stranger on a world that does not want you, and against the day when Mars is free, I leave you."

Before departing, he got several oxygen tanks from the boat and hooked them into the man's air supply. That was quite a bit of air for one in suspended animation. Enough to keep him alive for a thousand years.

(Continued from p. 2)

BACK TO THE FOLD...

402 West Clay,
Houston 6, Texas

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

PLANET was the first s-f magazine I read, and the recollection of this fact for some time prevented me from not buying it. Nevertheless, some year-and-half ago I bought what I thought would be my last issue of the magazine. And I meant it too.

But, a two-month or so ago, I was talking (about sfantasy, naturally) with Chad Oliver and Garvin Berry, and Chad mentioned, in connection with the phenomenon which may be known to literary historians of the future as "The S-F Renaissance of 1950-?", that even PLANET STORIES had improved. I was incredulous, until I considered the astonishing (no competitor now, sob) improvement in the former Palmer magazine, and the improvement in Palmer in his own magazines.

So, I bought the V. 4, no. 8 issue of PS, which somehow appeared on the magazine rack of the local drugstore (which does not ordinarily carry it), though somewhat late. The stories were good (most of them), and, better yet, Mitkey's return was prophesied. I decided to become a regular reader of PS once more. And the stories in the November issue consolidated my resolve, as you shall read in the story-rating and comment which follows.

1. CARRY ME HOME by C. H. Liddell. I'd have liked a bit more elaboration on the subject of the Thing in the Pool, but this was too unusually good to quibble about. And I mean unusually! Usually, aliens in sf are, whatever their appearance, somewhat revised humans in behavior. Not that respect for absolute justice is an inhuman characteristic. Nevertheless, I think that even the most lawabiding humans would have as much trouble as Rohan did in adjusting to the rule of the D'vahnayan.

2. MITKEY RIDES AGAIN by Fredric Brown. This was something of a disappointment. It was a fine tale, but, as one might expect after these years, most of the mood which made THE STAR-MOUSE what it was has dissipated. This is an almost pure adventure story, but so good a one that I can't be too angry with Brown for his simplification of the characters and themes of the original story. Whitey could have been better drawn, I thought, but that might have stretched the somewhat thin story to the breaking point in the necessary expansion. Incidentally, your blurb was an example and a goal. But the description on the contents page was uncomfortably close to the "Sool Darm opened his many-lidded reptilian eyes" school.

3. MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA by Allen K. Lang. A gadget story, which PLANET STORIES (pardon the personification) would probably have recoiled from in horror, a few years ago. The gimmick was not an especially clever one, but the characters and setting were better than usual in gadget stories, which usually ignore such requirements in the joy of puzzlement. Besides, the first six paragraphs were so good that I couldn't rate it any lower even had the remainder been on the G. O. Smith (whom never allow to contaminate your pages) level.

4. FINAL MISSION by John D. MacDonald.

This should get some sort of "least original story of the year" prize. The indirect method of narration saved it.

5. CARGO TO CALLISTO by Jay B. Drexel. This was standard stuff, but the author was pleasantly attentive to the details which make up verisimilitude.

6. THE LAST TWO ALIVE by Alfred Coppel. This offering is so bad (aside from the writing, style, or whatchamacallit) that I am tempted to shout "Ia! Shubniggurath! Yog-Sothoth! Cthulhu f'tagh'n R'yeh! The goat with a thousand Young" and to rate it in terms of Zeno-jugs. But I will be merciful, and only list my objections (why didn't you or the previous editor think of them before you or he bought the story or whatever?) in four main categories. I. It was an Adam and Eve story. No doubt most of your readers, being science-fiction fans, are Darwinists. And as for the orthodox, this type of story offends them too, by rationalizing their delusions. II. If you're going to rationalize the Bible, you might at least read it first. There is no reason to connect the serpent of Genesis with the Satan of Job, or either with Lucifer son of the Morning. And you can hardly write a story of this type and omit Yahveh, as Coppel did, without making yourself ridiculous. Coppel seems to have derived his plot rather from Milton's ridiculously scrambled account than from the Bible itself, and, in any case, the account in Genesis is probably derived from a much older Babylonian myth (extant), which differs still more from Milton's high-aesthetic nonsense. III. I refuse to believe that any outside agency (or any inside agency) short of surgery can change a man's bony structure into an ape's within zero generations. And, if the apes were dumped on one continental mass and Aram and Deve on the other, how account for the almost even distribution of men and monkeys through both land masses? (I started to write apes instead of monkeys above, but remembered in time that there are no native American apes.) And, since no change in size in the infected subjects was mentioned, how does Mr. Coppel account for the fact the apes which man most resembles (or vice versa) are the small (usually, that is) lemurs? IV. I refuse to believe that a society not founded on the same history as our "Western" society could have the same culture.

7. SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS by Fox B. Holden. Just filler. Competent, but not very.

What's the idea of having an unpunnameable name, huh?

MICHAEL WIGODSKY

Sorry to cut that impressive list of artists out of your overlong letter, Mike—but you'll find two you wanted in this issue: Edd Cartier and Paul Orban.

Hm, another Timmins fan...rare animals, though Ghu knows why! Shake, pardner...

UNPUNNAMEABLE, EH?

115 E. Mosholu Pkwy.
Bronx, 67, N. Y.

DEAR JOVIAN BRONTOSAURUS:

This is indeed a gala day (and as Groucho Marx once said, a gal a day is enough for anybody). I am writing a letter to PLANET! (Knew you'd be overjoyed). No doubt, once you have

(Continued on p. 39)



The **STAR-SAINT**

By A. E. VAN VOGT



AS HE PASSED THE TWO women in the corridor of the spaceship COLONIST 12, Leonard Hanley heard one of them say:

"He was on the far side of the galaxy,

and came here when he heard about our trouble. He doesn't need spaceships to travel, you know . . ."

Hanley walked on, cynical and annoyed. As leader of the colonists, he'd been ad-



*Metal screeched . . . men
shrieked in dismayed agony . . .*

Mark Rogan could travel the airless Void without spaceships. He would answer an appeal for help from anywhere in the Galaxy—if it interested him. And he had a strange talent for dealing with alien life-forms—such as the terrible, invisible Destroyer that stalked eight-hundred colonists on far-Ariel . . .

vised two hours before by Captain Cranston that Mark Rogan had arrived. The commanding officer's memo had stated, among other things:

"Since we will reach the planet Ariel, our destination, within half an Earth day, we are fortunate that the Space Patrol's great alien communications expert was available to help us. Mr. Rogan's presence means that you and your people can make your landing at once, regardless of what may have happened to the first settlement . . . and the ship can leave."

The reference to the ship departing immediately made Hanley grim. "Oh, no, you don't, Captain," he thought. "You're not leaving till we find out what's happened down there."

He continued along the corridor to the radio room, looked in through the window, and saw that the operator on duty was a young man named Farde. "Anything new?" Hanley asked.

The operator turned lazily. His manner had just enough insolence in it to be irritating, and just enough deference to make it difficult to take offense.

"Same old repetition of our messages," he said.

HANLEY hesitated. Time had been when he had tried to break down this barrier between crew and passengers. He'd felt that, in a long, two-year voyage, there shouldn't be constraint or hostility. Yet, in the end, he'd given up. To the crew members, the eight hundred colonists—men, women and children—were "emigrants." They had no lower term applicable to human beings.

Hanley, who was an engineer, and who had been a university professor, had often thought the crew members were not a prepossessing lot.

Once more, he hesitated, remembering the two women who had gossiped in the corridor about the mysterious Mark Rogan. He said casually: "We were lucky to get hold of Mark Rogan."

"Yep."

"When," asked Hanley, "did he first get in touch with you?"

"Oh, that wouldn't be through here, sir."

"How do you mean?" Sharply. "Don't

you get all radio messages here?"

"Well—yes, in a sense." The operator hesitated. "Fact is, Mr. Rogan doesn't answer regular calls. You broadcast your problem. He comes only if he's interested."

"He just arrives, is that it?"

"That's correct."

"Thanks," said Hanley in a subdued voice.

He was quietly furious as he walked on. The set-up shrieked of the phoniness of a man who allowed people to believe that he was supernormal. So he didn't use space-ships to travel through space! And he helped only if something interested him!

Hanley's anger subsided abruptly. It struck him with a shock that Rogan's coming had sinister significance. Because he *had* come.

Hanley reached his own apartment; and Eleanora, his wife, was serving lunch to himself and the two children when a wall communicator switched on, and a voice announced:

"Attention, all passengers and crew. We are entering the atmosphere of Ariel. Captain Cranston has called a meeting in the auditorium for one hour from now to discuss the landing."

HANLEY sat awkwardly in a chair on the auditorium platform, and uneasily watched the angry colonists. It seemed hard to believe right now that they had elected him their leader. For he realized they must land regardless of the danger on the planet below; and that was a reality that most of the colonists did not seem to be facing.

They were shouting furiously, shaking their fists at Captain Cranston, who stood at the front of the platform. The roar of their voices filled the small room, and echoed from the halls beyond, where other people crowded, listening to the loud-speaker.

Despite his own tension, Hanley kept being distracted by the stranger who sat in the chair beside him. Rogan, he guessed. It could be no other on this ship, where everyone knew everyone else.

Even without his foreknowledge, there would have been reasons for noticing the man. Rogan was slim of build, about five

feet ten inches tall; and Hanley had heard him say something to Captain Cranston in a voice so soft, so gentle, that he had felt a thickening of dislike in his throat. The stranger had eyes as green as emeralds, an unusual color for a human being.

With a faint distaste, Hanley turned away from the man and studied the viewing plate at the rear of the platform. It was quite a large plate, and a sizable area of the ground below was visible on it.

The picture was not clear at this height, yet it was sharp enough to show green vegetation. To the left was the silvery gleam of a winding river. To the right were the ruins of the first human settlement on the planet Ariel.

Hanley studied the scene unhappily. As a scientist and administrator, he felt no personal fear at anything that might develop below. But when he thought of Eleanora and the children, his feelings about the landing became mixed up.

The audience quieted at last. At the front of the stage, Captain Cranston said: "I admit an unfortunate situation has arisen. I cannot explain how, on an apparently uninhabited planet, a human colony has been destroyed. But I must land you. We haven't enough food to take back such a large group. I regret it, but here you are and here you must remain. But now—" he half turned—"I want to introduce you to a man who came aboard ship today. Mark Rogan, one of the great men of the Space Patrol, is here to help you. Mr. Rogan, will you come over here to be introduced. And you, also, Mr. Hanley."

As Rogan came up, the officer said, "Mr. Rogan, please say a few words to these unhappy people."

Rogan looked at them for a moment, then smiled, and said in the same gentle voice Hanley had already heard:

"Folks, everything will be all right. Have no fear. I've listened to these radio repetitions, and I feel confident that in a day or so I'll be able to give you the signal that means safe landings."

HE STEPPED BACK. There was dead silence; and then all over the auditorium women sighed. Hanley, who

had listened in amazement to the sugary reassurance, stared at the audience, baffled. Anxious, too. He had heard Mark Rogan had an unsavory reputation where women were concerned.

Captain Cranston was speaking again, conversationally: "Len, I want you to meet Mark Rogan." To Rogan, he said: "Mr. Hanley is leader of the colonists."

The vividly green eyes seemed to study Hanley's face. Rogan smiled finally, and held out a slender hand. Hanley grasped it grudgingly, and instinctively squeezed hard on the long, tapering fingers.

Rogan's smile sharpened slightly, and he returned the pressure. Hanley felt as though his hand had been caught in a vise. He turned pale with the pain of it. In agony, he let go. Instantly, the other's grip relaxed also. Momentarily, thoughtfully now, the green eyes examined him again. Hanley had the unhappy conviction that his enmity had been evaluated, and that he had lost the first round.

Captain Cranston was facing the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, the exploratory landings will be made by armed craft under the joint command of Mr. Rogan and Mr. Hanley. There's still time for a descent today, so let's make our preparations."

* * *

Into the crewboat Hanley loaded a walkie-talkie, a Geiger-counter, a ground radar instrument, and a gadget that could make vibrations all the way from sound waves through the ultra-sonic range on up to short wave radio.

From the corner of one eye, he saw Rogan coming along the corridor. He turned away hastily, then—as quickly—looked again. And his first impression was right. The man wore slacks and a shirt that was open at the neck. His pockets did not bulge with gadgets. His hands were empty. He carried no visible equipment.

Rogan nodded a greeting which Hanley curtly acknowledged. As Rogan stepped into the crewboat, Hanley thought satirically: "At least he's condescending to travel by ordinary transportation."

It was about ten minutes later that the

small craft came to rest in the middle of the desolation that had been a settlement of one thousand people.

As Hanley climbed shakily to the ground, one of the crew members said: "The place looks as if it'd been worked over by a bulldozer."

Hanley had to swallow as he stared at the shambles. Somebody, or something, had gone to a lot of trouble. The buildings, which had been made of field stone, were so thoroughly demolished that even the individual stones had been scattered. Here and there, grass was beginning to grow again. Except for that, and except for a few large trees, as far as he could see, the land had been ploughed raw as if by a gigantic scraper.

HANLEY strode forward, stumbled over something, looked down, and drew back hastily. He had stepped on what was left of a human being. The flesh and bone had been ground into the soil.

He saw now that there were bodies all over among the wreckage. It was not always easy to make them out. Many of them seemed a part of the ground, so completely had they been smashed, and pushed in, and covered with dirt.

Frank Stratton, a young colonist, came over and stood beside him. Hanley turned and called to Rogan:

"I think we should take a quick look over this territory, Mr. Rogan. How about you and me walking down by the river, while Mr. Stratton and—" he named a colonist technician—"go into those hills. The others can pair up to suit themselves. No directives to anyone. Just report what you see, and turn back in two hours or less."

Hanley didn't wait for agreement, but hurried over to the crewboat. It would be unusual for the two leaders of a group to go off together, but he was determined to see an alien communications expert at work. In the back of his mind he had already decided to try to solve the problem himself, without help from the "expert."

He lifted his pack of instruments out of the boat, and slung it over his shoulder. The weight of the load made him stagger, but he leaned into it; and presently Rogan

and he were walking away from the shattered remnants of the settlement. Hanley was surprised that the other had yielded so readily to his suggestion. He noticed that Rogan kept looking into the sky, and only once or twice paused to study the ground.

The hard, gravelly soil gave way to smooth, lawn-like grass. The stones and boulders that had been everywhere around the destroyed village, disappeared. They came to the first considerable grove of trees. Some bore fruit. Others were blossom-filled. A sweet fragrance permeated the clear, warm air.

They reached the river, a wide stream that flowed with an oily slickness suggesting depth and speed. They followed a natural pathway along the foot of an ever steeper shore till finally the bank was a hundred foot high overhanging cliff. From ahead, now, came the roaring sound of water tumbling over falls.

Rogan, who was slightly ahead, paused; and Hanley chose the opportunity to lower his heavy pack and set up his instruments. The Geiger-counter had not clicked once, so he laid it on the ground out of the way. He spoke briefly into the walkie-talkie, and it roared back at him a babble of signals.

It was not a pleasant feeling, listening to that confusion of calls. Aboard ship, the effect had been eerie. Here several miles from the village, it gave Hanley a queasy sensation.

He was suddenly dissatisfied with their position. "Mr. Rogan," he called, "don't you think we're in a rather vulnerable spot?"

Rogan did not turn, nor did he show in any way that he had heard the question. Hanley flushed and, abruptly furious, walked over to him. "We'll have this out right now!" he thought.

AS HE CAME UP, he saw that the other was staring down at a small area of sand. It reminded Hanley that Rogan had paused twice previously, and both times had looked at similar patches of sand.

The discovery briefly drained Hanley's anger. He had been looking for a pattern in Rogan's activity; and here it was. He stopped, and studied the area. It looked

like ordinary sand, a grayish yellow-brown in color, quite unassuming, and about as unlikely a source of life as anything he had ever seen.

Hanley hesitated. He wanted to ask questions, but the man was so discourteous that he hesitated to expose himself to further insults. He half-turned away—and then saw that Rogan was looking at him. Rogan said in his soft voice:

"Mr. Hanley, I sense in your attitude that you spoke to me a short time ago, and that you are incensed because I did not answer. Is that correct?"

Hanley nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The wording seemed to imply—he couldn't decide, but it re-stimulated his anger. "Sense in your attitude," indeed. Was Rogan trying to suggest that he had *not* heard the words? Hanley waited, fuming.

Rogan went on, "I find myself in this situation so often that, for the most part, I do not bother to explain it any more." His green eyes glowed as with a light of their own. "However, since it may be necessary for us to cooperate in the coming crisis, I ask you to believe me when I say that I do not hear when I am concentrating. I shut off all extraneous phenomena." He finished gently, "If that statement violates your sense of reality, I'm sorry."

Hanley said grudgingly, "I've heard of such things. Hypnosis."

"If you need a label," said Rogan, and his tone was almost indifferent, "that's as good as any. But, actually, it is not the answer."

Belatedly, it struck Hanley that the other had made an effort to be friendly. He said quickly, "Thank you, Mr. Rogan, I appreciate the explanation. But would you mind telling me, what are you looking for in that sand?"

"Life." Rogan was turning away. "Life in so simple a state that it is generally not even thought of as such. You see, Mr. Hanley, every planet has its own initial life-process, the state where inorganic matter and organic are almost indistinguishable. This process goes on continuously; and it is the building block of all subsequent life on that particular world. I cannot prove this to you. There is no instrument I know of except my own brain for

detecting its existence. You will not immediately realize to what extent that fact rules my actions. And so, I suggest that you do *not* start feeling friendly toward me because I have made this rather involved explanation. You'll probably regret it."

Hanley, who was already disposed to be more friendly, felt uneasy. It seemed clear that Rogan meant exactly what he had said.

He saw that the man was looking at the sand. Hanley turned, and strode back to his instruments. He thought: "After all, I ought to be able to locate the larger life forms without knowing anything about the building blocks—and in that department mechanical equipment may be very useful."

He set up his ground radar device, and began to send signals straight down. He aimed the signals in various directions and, once, obtained a reaction which indicated the existence of a tiny cave—it was a mere pocket, and unimportant.

He repacked the radar instrument, and began to tune the vibration machine. The response needle leaped suddenly. There was a shout from Rogan: "Hanley—jump—this way!"

Hanley heard a crashing sound above him, and involuntarily looked up. He yelled hoarsely as he saw the rock, only feet away. He tried to duck—and there was a stunning blow, an instant of unbearable pain, and blackness.

PAIN. His head ached and ached. With a groan, Hanley opened his eyes. He was lying beneath the overhanging edge of the rocky cliff, a few feet from where he had been when the rock struck him.

The sound of the nearby waterfall was loud in his ears. Instinctively, before he remembered that it was still out of sight, he strained to locate it. He succeeded only in getting a better view of the visible part of the ledge, where Rogan had been before the rock struck him.

Rogan was not in sight.

Hanley climbed to his feet. His equipment was lying to his left, the radar device on its side, smashed. Ignoring it, he walked along the ledge past it to where there was a sharp turn. That gave him a

view of nearly a mile of the river's curving bank. There was not a movement anywhere that he could see.

Puzzled, and beginning to be angry, Hanley walked in the other direction nearly two hundred yards. He saw the falls suddenly around a bend. The water dropped more than a hundred feet to the beginning of a great valley. A forest came down to the river's edge, and stretched away into the distance, a green and brown vista.

Nowhere was there a sign of Rogan.

Hanley returned to get his things, undecided as to what his next move should be. He felt impelled to go on. And yet, unquestionably, the rock had missed killing him by millimeters. There was caked blood on the side of his head, and his cheek burned where the skin had been scraped off.

He was momentarily relieved to discover a note stuck in the handle of the Geiger-counter. "The guy's human after all," he thought.

Then he read the note. It said: "Go back to the ship! I'll be gone for a day or two."

Hanley compressed his lips, and the flush that mounted to his cheeks was not all fever from his wound. Yet, once more, his anger died away. Rogan was not responsible for him; and his job on this planet did not require that he look after injured people.

Hanley switched on the walkie-talkie. The earphones were alive with sounds. His own voice, in jumbled messages that he'd sent from the ship more than a week before, was part of the crescendo of noise. Half a dozen times, he tried to send an S. O. S., giving his position. The appeal was taken up, and lost among the rest.

There was nothing to do but start along the trail back . . . He reached the village just before dark, and was immediately taken up to the ship. Both doctors insisted that he spend the night in the hospital ward, though they reported reassuringly that he would probably be all right in the morning.

Hanley slept fitfully. Once, he waked up and thought: "At least he's a courageous man. He's down there alone, at night."

It justified to some extent his own lie to

the others. He had told them that Rogan had gone on only after assuring himself that Hanley was not seriously hurt. Rogan had done nothing of the kind. But it was essential that the colonists continue to trust him.

Some time during the night Hanley's strength and energy came back. About dawn, he opened his eyes in tense excitement. That rock! Its fall had been no accident. Somebody or something had shoved it down upon him.

"I'll go out there in the morning," he decided.

HE WAS DRESSING when his wife came in, about nine o'clock. She walked over to a chair, and sank into it. Her fine gray eyes looked tired. Her long blonde hair had not been properly arranged. There were lines in her face.

"I've been worried," she said drably.

"I'm all right," Hanley spoke reassuringly. "I was only bruised a little, and shaken."

She seemed not to hear. "When I think of him down there with the fate of the whole colony depending on his remaining alive—"

Briefly, it shocked Hanley to realize that her anxiety was for Rogan, not himself. She looked up unhappily.

"Len, do you think it was wise of you to let him go on alone?"

Hanley stared at her in amazement, but made no reply. It seemed to him that there was no adequate comment to make to that. Nevertheless, as he ate breakfast, he felt more determined than ever to solve this problem before Rogan.

A few minutes later, with Frank Stratton at the controls of the crewboat, he set out once more for the river. His plan of action was simplicity itself: If there was life here, it would show itself in some way. An observant man should be able to find it without having a special type of brain.

* * *

They came down in a meadow half a mile from the river and about a mile from the waterfall. It seemed a sufficiently central position from which to examine the

rock-throwing episode.

Young Stratton, who had been silent during the flight said suddenly, "Pretty country—if it weren't for the stones."

Hanley nodded absently. He climbed down to the ground, and then paused for another survey of the countryside. Trees, miles of green grass, gaily colored flowers, the silvery gleam of the waterfall, and the great forested valley beyond it—here was natural beauty in abundance.

True, as Stratton had pointed out, there were small rocks in plenty, but they could be removed. Hanley walked to the nearest one, and picked it up. It was about the size of a large melon, and unexpectedly light in weight. He stood holding it, watching the sunlight flash over its surface.

At first glance, it seemed to be granite, the bright reflecting surfaces suggesting mica specks. On closer examination, Hanley wasn't so sure. He saw that his fingers were already stained yellow. Sulphur, he guessed. And in rather free form.

Behind him, Stratton said sullenly, "This fellow, Rogan—who is he? I mean, is there some special reason why the women have to go silly over him? Dorothy kept me awake half the night worrying about his being down here alone."

Intent though he had been on the stone, Hanley recalled the similar reaction of Eleanora, and half turned. "He's the only one of his kind," he began, "except for—" He stopped. For the rest was rumor only. He went on slowly, "According to reports, his parents were wrecked on some uninhabited planet, and he was born there while they were repairing the ship. He was still a child when they took him away, and by the time they began to suspect he was different, it was too late."

"Too late for what?"

"They had no idea where the planet was on which they'd been wrecked."

"Oh!" The blonde youth was silent. Hanley was about to return his attention to the stone when Stratton said, "What's this story about his having children all over the galaxy?"

"Another rumor."

Hanley spoke curtly. It gave him no pleasure to defend Mark Rogan, especially when his own mind was uneasy with the

same suspicions as Stratton was experiencing.

"What's he trying to do?" asked the young man grimly. "Produce a bunch of freaks like himself?"

That was so exactly the way he had originally heard it that Hanley swallowed. In spite of himself, he said sarcastically, "Maybe he believes his wild talent for dealing with non-human races should be spread as widely as possible. Particularly, I imagine, he feels that when his services have been called for, the women of the new colony should be only too willing to provide perceptive children and so secure the future of the human race on that planet. It—"

He came to an abrupt stop, startled. He had intended to be ironic, but abruptly the notion sounded plausible. *And necessary.*

"My God!" he thought, "if he ever comes near Eleanora, I'll—"

In abrupt tension, he raised the rock in his hands above his head, and flung it down upon another one nearby. There was loud, cracking sound. Both stones shattered, and a chance wind blew a cloud of yellowish dust into his face. The smell of sulphur was momentarily unbearably strong. Hanley coughed, almost choked, and then he had backed out into fresher air.

He was about to bend down over the broken pieces of the two stones, when Stratton let out a yell. "Mr. Hanley—the rocks—they're moving!"

IN THAT FIRST MOMENT of mental confusion, Hanley had several fantastic impressions. Unquestionably, stones all over the meadow were beginning to roll towards them, slowly, as if they were not exactly sure of their direction—but they *were* rolling. Simultaneously, the wind that had been merely a series of gusts until then, began to blow at gale proportions. Dead leaves whirled into his face. Small pieces of grit stung his cheeks.

Hanley's eyes began to water. Through a blur, he made his way to the crewboat, and fumbled for the steps that led to the deck. The wind was so strong now that he had to bend into it to remain on his feet. From above him, young Stratton yell-

ed: "This way—quick!"

A hand caught Hanley's shoulder, guiding him. A moment later he was scrambling up the steps, and had flung himself prostrate beside his companion. He lay there for a minute, gasping. Then he saw Stratton wriggling towards the controls.

Hanley shouted at him, "Frank—wait!"

The blonde youth turned, and said earnestly: "Mr. Hanley, we'd better get out of here. We might be blown over on our side."

His words were tossed by the wind, distorted, and delivered finally half-faded, but still comprehensible. Hanley shook his head stubbornly.

"Can't you see?" he shouted. "These stones are the life-form! We've got to stay and find out things about them. If we can get enough information we won't need Rogan."

It stopped the young man. He turned a contorted face towards Hanley. "By heaven," he said, "We'll show that—"

His whole body twisted with eagerness. Hanley called to him, "Turn on the radio! Let's see what's coming over."

The radio was alive with voices. Wherever Stratton turned the dial, he produced uproar that was loud and continuous. Hanley listened grimly for a minute, and then glanced over the side of the boat.

He winced as he saw that the stones were piling up against the side of the small vessel, one on top of the other. The pile, at its highest point, was about three feet from the ground. It sloped back to a thin line of pebbles some twelve to fifteen feet from the bigger stones at the front. Hanley estimated that there were several hundred stones already in the pile.

More were coming. He flinched, but kept on looking. As far as he could see over that wind-swept meadow, stones were rolling towards the crewboat. Their speed seemed to vary according to their size. He judged that the medium-sized ones were traveling two or three miles per hour, whereas several that were almost two feet in diameter were moving at nearer five miles per hour.

The pile grew even as he watched. Hanley turned uneasily toward Stratton. And saw that the young man was pushing with

a stick at something that seemed to be threatening him from the other side of the small craft.

Stratton turned, "The stones!" he yelled hoarsely. "They've piled up. They'll be spilling on top of us in a minute."

Hanley hesitated. It seemed to him that by remaining they had learned how the enemy attacked. Perhaps, if they stayed just a bit longer—

His thought was interrupted by another shout from young Stratton: "Mr. Hanley—look!"

HANLEY followed the young man's pointing hand. A giant rock was lifting itself out of the ground a hundred feet away. It was at least ten feet in diameter, and it was poising now, turning, as if trying by means of some alien senses to decide its direction. In a moment it would be bearing down on them.

Hanley gulped, and then in a loud yet calm voice said, "All right—lift her up!"

As Stratton manipulated the drive control lever, there was a surge of power that sent a vibratory impulse through the rigid metals of the ship. The deck throbbed under Hanley, and he could almost feel the engines straining to lift the craft.

"Mr. Hanley, something is holding us down!"

Hanley thought blankly: "We'll have to get out and run. But where to?"

He was about to say, "Try again!" when he saw that the huge rock was starting to move. Straight at the ship it came, gathering speed each time it turned over.

Hanley shouted, "Frank—the big rock—come this way!"

He didn't wait to see if the young man obeyed. With a convulsive effort, he flung himself far out over the side of the craft. He landed on the rock he had aimed at, and, using it as a spring board, leaped again.

Behind him, there was a crash, a squealing of metal and the shriek of a human being in mortal agony.

And silence.

* * *

He was running, with a dying wind

lending wings to his feet. Hanley finally slowed from exhaustion, and looked back. He had gone about two hundred and fifty yards; and there were several trees and much shrubbery between him and the crewboat. But he could see that the rock was still lying on top of the smashed craft. He noticed no movement anywhere. Even the stones were still.

The great wind blew in gusts only now. It was spent. Already, the incident had a dream-like quality. It seemed incredible that Frank Stratton was lying dead or desperately injured in the wreck of the boat. Hanley thought distractedly: "I've got to go back."

A hundred feet from him, a small stone stirred, lifted itself out of its hole, and started hesitantly toward him. Simultaneously, there was other movement. Scores of stones began to move in his direction.

Hanley retreated. He had an empty feeling about what had happened to his companion. But far more important was the fact that he had found the hostile life-form on this planet. He had to get back to the ship with that vital information.

He headed on a course parallel to the river toward the village, which he judged was three or four miles away. In a few minutes he had outdistanced the moving stones. "They're slow," he thought exultantly. "It takes a little while for them to decide that somebody is around."

He began to picture the life of the colonists on this frontier planet. They'd have to clear rocks from whole areas. Atoguns with their thousand-unit explosive charges to a loading would be standard equipment for men and women alike. It was even possible to visualize a time when the curious rock-life would be of museum interest only. They must have a very slow growth, and so could probably be eliminated from all except the most remote territories within a measurable time.

He was still considering the possibilities when he saw a solid glitter of stones ahead.

HANLEY STOPPED, chilled. Hastily, he turned from the river. And stopped again. The stony glitter was in that direction, also.

Swallowing, he headed for the river.

His eyes searched for stones in that direction. A few moving objects were visible among the shrubbery, but there was so much brush and scrubwood that it seemed evident that small rocks would have difficulty in making progress. That became his hope, instantly.

He hurried past several large trees, sizing them up for girth as he went by. The largest tree in the vicinity he found less than two hundred feet from the cliff's edge.

One section of its huge trunk sloped up from the ground at so gradual a slant that he'd be able to run up it swiftly, scramble up to another thick branch, and from there go almost to the top of the main trunk which towered majestically above any other tree in the neighborhood.

Hanley hurried to the edge of the cliff overlooking the river. The water was nearly fifty feet below, and the wall of the cliff ran sheerly down. It even slanted inward slightly; and there was no possibility of climbing down with a ladder. One look convinced Hanley that the river did not offer a way of escape.

As he headed back toward the tree, he saw uneasily that more than a score of stones had rolled between him and the safety of the trunk. He walked straight toward one of them. It kept rolling in the same direction after he had stepped over it, and did not stop until he had gone past two more of the blind things. Then it halted, and began hesitantly to move towards him again.

His fear faded even more. He took a quick look around to make sure that he was not being hemmed in. Then he waited for the stone to come up to him. As it approached, he studied it anxiously for a sign of intelligence. There was nothing but the smoothly porous, rock-like substance.

It rolled right up against his foot, touched his boot—and attached itself.

He kicked at it, but it clung as if it were glued to the boot. It weighed at least five pounds, and when he moved his foot he felt the drag of it, the need to strain his muscles in order to lift it, the sharp fear that he wouldn't be able to get rid of it.

Other stones were approaching him.

Alarmed, Hanley retreated to the tree trunk, and, bending down, removed the boot to which the rock had attached itself. He shook the boot, vainly. With abrupt determination, he raised it above his head, and flung it, boot and stone together, straight down on another stone.

The two rocks dissolved; there was a gust of wind that blew the sulphurous dust into his face. Hanley coughed furiously. When he could see again through his tear-filled eyes, he was first attracted to a gleaming crystal that lay in the pile of debris. He studied it, then hastily he recovered his boot, and started up the trunk.

It was time. As far as the eye could see, the land glittered with the movement of stones converging towards him.

His day in the tree passed uneventfully.

Just before dark, Hanley climbed to a higher branch and found himself a reasonably comfortable crotch for the night. He spent the early hours of darkness wide awake, alert to sounds below. About midnight, he dozed.

He awakened with a start. The sun was just coming up over the horizon—and a crewboat was speeding toward him, following the course of the river. He jumped hastily to his feet, almost fell out of the tree as a thick branch broke like so much dead wood. And then, safely balanced again, he tore off his coat and shirt.

He began to wave the shirt frantically . . .

AS ELEANORA served him breakfast Hanley learned that Mark Rogan had returned to the ship the evening before, spent the night aboard, and departed at dawn. He stopped eating, and considered the news. Finally:

"Did he have anything to say? Had he solved the problem?"

He waited, jealous of his own discovery, anxious not to have been out-done. Eleanora sighed; then:

"I don't think so. Of course, he talked mostly to the men. Perhaps he gave them private information."

Hanley doubted it. And so, by the simple process of going out and looking, an ordinary man had bested the famous communications expert.

He was about to resume eating when the odd tone in which his wife had spoken made him look up. "He talked *mostly* to the men?" he echoed.

There was a flush on her face. She said, "I had him to dinner." She added quickly, "I expected you back. It didn't occur to me that you—"

She sounded so defensive that he felt compelled to interrupt: "It's all right, my dear. I understand. I understand."

He wasn't sure that he did. As he continued to eat, he studied her unobtrusively, shaken by his thoughts. Once he almost said: "Are you sure that he didn't also spend the night?" The insult of the thought was so outrageous that he cringed, and felt angry at himself.

But it decided him. He had been intending to wait, and learn what Rogan had discovered; the problem of dealing with the rock-life was by no means solved. But he found himself suddenly less amenable to that kind of reasoning.

He discovered that the other leaders, once they heard the detailed account of his experience, were equally reluctant to wait.

"Our women have gone crazy about that man," one individual said angrily. "Do you know what my wife suggested when she heard that Frank Stratton was dead? She thought his widow ought to marry Rogan right away, before he went away. Of course, from all accounts, he's not the marrying kind. But just imagine having such an idea instantly."

"It's a survival instinct," said another man. "History is full of stories of women who have wanted their children to be fathered by famous men. In this case, with Rogan's special ability—"

"Not so special," somebody interrupted. "Our own leader, Leonard Hanley, discovered the enemy without any help from the famous man."

Hanley ended the somewhat heated discussion finally by saying, "It will take us most of today to get our main equipment down. If Mr. Rogan condescends to turn up before we're ready to disembark the women and children, he can offer his views at that time. Otherwise—"

Mark Rogan, as it happened, did not

condescend to turn up.

THE LANDINGS were made in open areas along the river bank in the forested valley below the falls. By noon, everybody was on the ground. Hanley had a final consultation with Captain Cranston, and was informed that the COLONIST 12 would leave immediately.

"We've already been far too long on this trip," the officer said in justification. "The owners will be furious."

Hanley could feel no sympathy for the gentlemen, but he recognized that he and the others would experience the grimmer effects of that commercialism. He tried to think of something that would delay the ship's departure, but all that occurred to him finally was:

"What about Mr. Rogan? Aren't you going to wait for him?"

Captain Cranston shrugged. "A patrol ship will probably pick him up. Well, goodbye."

As they shook hands, Hanley thought cynically that there was no suggestion now that Rogan could travel through space without spaceships. It seemed amazing that anyone could have believed such nonsense.

Mid-afternoon. Out of the corner of one eye, Hanley saw Eleanora—who had been working beside the tent—snatch a compact from a pocket of her slacks, and hastily start to powder her face. Hanley glanced in the direction she had been gazing, and winced. Mark Rogan was coming toward him along the river bank.

The Patrol man said nothing until he was less than half a dozen feet from Hanley. Then: "Where's the ship? Mr. Hanley, did you order this landing?"

His voice was as soft as it had always been, but there was an edge of suppressed anger in it that chilled Hanley despite his confidence. The thought came: "Have I possibly made a mistake?"

Aloud, he said, "Yes, I ordered the landing. It just happens, Mr. Rogan—" he was beginning to feel sure of himself again—"that I discovered the nature of the hostile life on this planet, and we have taken all necessary precautions."

Twice, Rogan seemed about to speak, but finally he stepped back. There was an enigmatic smile on his face as he looked around at the busy colonists. Several trees had been chopped down, and they were now in the process of being converted to plastic.

Silently, Rogan walked over to the complex machinery, and watched the bubbling up of the sap in the wood as it was sawed, and then the swift chemical action that neutralized the resinous substance.

He came back to Hanley, and his vividly green eyes seemed to glow with irony, as he said, "What *did* you discover?"

He listened with his head slightly tilted to one side, as if he were hearing more than the words. And his eyes had a faraway look in them; he seemed to be gazing at a scene that was in his mind. He said finally, "You think then that the crystal you saw in the rock after you had smashed it was possibly the 'brain'?"

Hanley hesitated; then defensively, "The piezoelectric crystal is the heart of radio and television engineering, and in a certain sense crystals grow, and—"

He got no further. Eleanora had run forward and grasped Rogan by the arm. "Please," she begged, "what's wrong? What's the matter?"

Rogan released himself gently from her fingers. "Mrs. Hanley," he said quietly, "your husband has made a deadly dangerous error. The stone activity is merely a product of the scientific control which the ruling intelligence of this planet exercises over its environment."

He turned to the stricken Hanley. "Was there a strong wind at any time while you were being attacked?"

Hanley nodded mutely.

Rogan said, "Another manifestation."

He looked at his watch, and said, "It's a little more than two hours till dark. If we take only essentials, we can be out of this valley before the sun sets."

He paused. His green eyes fixed on Hanley's wavering gaze with a bleak intensity. He said curtly, "Give the command!"

"B-but—" Hanley stammered his reaction, then pulled himself together. "It's impossible. Besides, we've got to make our

stand somewhere. We—"

He stopped hopelessly, already convinced, but too miserable to go on.

Rogan said, "Give the order, and I'll explain—"

SHORTLY after night fell, a gale wind sprang up. It blew for an hour, sand filled, stinging their faces as they walked behind the long rows of caterpillar tractors. All the younger children were taken up in the six crewboats. When the storm was past, several of the healthier children were brought down, and their places in the boats taken by women who could no longer remain awake.

About midnight, the attack of the stones began. Rocks twenty and thirty feet in diameter thundered out of the darkness into the range of the groping searchlight beams, which were mounted on the tractors. Before the extent of the assault could be gauged, two of the tractors were crushed. Metal screeched, men shrieked in dismayed agony—and mounted ato-guns pulverized the rocks before any more damage could be done.

Several people had to be rescued from small stones that attached themselves to shoes and boots, and prevented all except the most awkward movement. When that was over, Hanley had to walk among the weary men and women, and insist that Rogan's directive to "keep moving" be obeyed.

Just before dawn, the ground under them began to heave and shake. Great fissures opened, and individuals had terrifying experiences before they were pulled to safety out of suddenly created abysses.

As the faint light of day broke through the blackness of the horizon, Hanley mumbled to Rogan, "You mean—they can cause sustained earthquakes of *that* proportion?"

Rogan said, "I don't think that will happen very often. I think it requires great courage for them to penetrate hot rock areas where such phenomena can be stirred up."

He broke off, thoughtfully: "I see this as an ally arrangement, with the onus being on man to prove that he can be helpful. Of course, it will take a while—after this unfortunate beginning—to persuade the Intelligence to consider such an arrangement.

It doesn't think in human terms."

Hanley was intent. "Let me get this clear. You're taking us to a flat plain north of here. You want us to build concrete huts there while we wait for you to persuade the Intelligence that we mean no harm. Is that right?"

Rogan said, "It'd be better if you kept moving. But of course that would be very difficult . . . with women . . . children." He seemed to be arguing with himself.

Hanley persisted, "But we'll be reasonably safe on such a barren plain?"

"Safe!" Rogan stared at him. "Man, you don't seem to understand. Despite the similarity to Earth appearance, this planet has a different life process. You're going to learn what that means."

HANLEY felt too humble to ask any more questions. An hour later, he watched as Rogan commandeered one of the crewboats, and flew off into the morning mists. About noon, Hanley dispatched the other crewboats to rescue some of the equipment they had abandoned the night before.

The boats came back about dark with a weird report. A barrel of salt meat had rolled away from them, and had evaded all their efforts to capture it. An atomic jet proved a hazard. It would start up, and lift itself into the air, and then shut off and fall back to the ground, only to repeat the process. It almost wrecked a crewboat before a magnetic crane mounted on another boat lifted it permanently clear of the ground. Thereafter it remained lifeless.

Hanley guessed unhappily: "Tentative experiments."

The colony spent the night on a level grassy plain. Guards patrolled the perimeter of the encampment. Tractor motors hummed and pulsed. Searchlights peered into the darkness, and all the grown-ups took turns at performing some necessary duty.

Hanley was awakened shortly after midnight by Eleanor. "Len—my shoes."

He examined them sleepily. The surface was all bumpy, with tiny knobs protruding through the polish. Hanley felt a grisly thrill as he realized that they were grow-

ing. He asked, "Where did you keep them?"

"Beside me."

"On the ground?"

"Yes."

"You should have kept them on," said Hanley, "the way I did mine."

"Leonard Hanley, I wouldn't wear shoes while I'm sleeping if it's the last—" She stopped, said in a subdued tone, "I'll put them on, see if they still fit."

Later, at breakfast, he saw her limping around, tears in her eyes, but without complaint.

THAT AFTERNOON one of the tractors exploded without warning, killing its driver. A flying segment tore off the arm of a five year old boy nearby. The women cried. The doctors eased the youngster's pain with drugs, and kept him alive. There were angry mutterings among the men. One man came over to Hanley.

"We're not going to stand for this much longer," he said. "We've got a right to fight back."

Rogan turned up just before dark, and listened in silence to the account of what had happened. He said finally, "There'll be more."

Hanley said grimly, "I can't understand why we don't set fire to every forest in this part of the planet, and clear the damned things from this whole area."

Rogan, who had been turning away, faced slowly about. His eyes were almost yellow in the fading light. He said, "Damn you, Hanley, you talk like so many scamps I've run into in my business. I tell you, you can't defeat this tree intelligence with fire, even though fire is the one thing it's afraid of. Its fear and its partial vulnerability is man's opportunity, not to destroy, but to help."

Hanley said helplessly, "But how does it operate? How does it control stones, and make winds and—"

"Those phenomena," said Rogan, "derive from the fact that its life-energy flows many times faster than ours. A nerve impulse in you and me moves approximately 300 feet a second. On this planet, it's just under 400,000. And so, even rocks have a primitive life-possibility.

Crystals form easily, and can be stimulated to imitate any vibrations that affect them. Far more important, there is a constant flow of life-energy through the ground itself. The result is that everything can be affected and controlled to some extent. Divert the energy to the ground surface through grass roots and sand; and great winds rush in to cool off the 'hot' surfaces. Divert it through one of our tractors and—"

"But," said Hanley, who had been frowning, "why didn't that tree I was on for a whole day and night—why didn't it try to kill me?"

"And call attention to itself!" said Rogan with that tight smile of his. "It might have tried something against you that would appear accidental—like the breaking of a branch that could make you fall—but nothing overt."

He broke off, firmly, "Mr. Hanley, there is no method but cooperation. Here is what you'll probably have to be prepared to do."

He outlined the steps, coolly, succinctly. No encroachment for several years on an area where there were trees. Definitely no use of lumber for any purpose, except such dying wood as Rogan might, by arrangement with the forest, assign to be cut. Establishment of fire-fighting equipment to help all forests in the vicinity of the colony against spontaneous fires, the pattern later to be extended over the entire planet.

When Rogan had finished, Hanley considered the plan, and found one flaw in it. He protested, "What I'd like to know is, how are we going to maintain contact with this Intelligence after you're gone?"

As he finished speaking, he saw that Eleanor had come up beside him. In the fading light, it seemed to Hanley that she was bending forward, as if straining for Rogan's answer.

Rogan shrugged. "Time alone," he said, "can resolve that problem."

THEY BUILT the village of New Earth beside a brook. There were no trees anywhere in sight. According to Rogan, the small shrubs that lined the banks of the stream were but distantly related to the greater tree-life, and could be used for any purpose.

There were no less than eighteen rock attacks during the next eleven days. In one of them, a stone one hundred and ninety feet in diameter roared across the plain toward them. It smashed two houses, plunged on for a mile across the plain, and then turned back. Crewboats with atoguns successfully exploded it before it was able to return to the village.

And then one night nothing at all happened. At dawn, Mark Rogan turned up, pale and weary looking, but smiling. "It's all right," he said. "You get your chance."

Men cheered hoarsely. Women wept and tried to touch his hand. Hanley stood back, and thought: "It's too soon to tell."

But the days passed, and there were no more manifestations. The guards began to sleep at their posts, and finally were no longer posted. At dusk on the eighth straight day of peace, there was a knock on the door of Hanley's house. Eleanora answered, and Hanley heard her talking to someone in a low tone. The softness of the other voice made him abruptly suspicious, and he was about to get up from his chair, when the door shut, and Eleanora came back in. She was breathless.

"He's leaving!" she said.

Hanley didn't ask who. He hurried outside, and saw that Rogan was already at the outskirts of the village, a vague figure in the gathering darkness. A week later, there was still no sign of him. Among the rank and file of the colonists, the whisper was that he had gone in his fashion to some other part of the galaxy. Hanley ridiculed the story, but when he heard it soberly stated in a gathering of technicians, he realized gloomily that the legend of Mark Rogan would survive all his denials.

Two months passed. Hanley awoke one morning to find that Eleanora had slipped into the bed beside him. "I wish to report to my lord and master," she said airily, "that there's going to be an addition to the Hanley clan."

After he had kissed her, Hanley lay silent, thinking: "If it has green eyes and jet black hair, I'll—I'll—"

He couldn't imagine what he'd do. He groaned inwardly in his terrible jealousy. But already at the back of his mind was the realization that the race of man would survive on one more alien planet.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 of *PLANET STORIES*, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1950.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Jerome Bixby, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of *PLANET STORIES*, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Editor, Jerome Bixby, 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

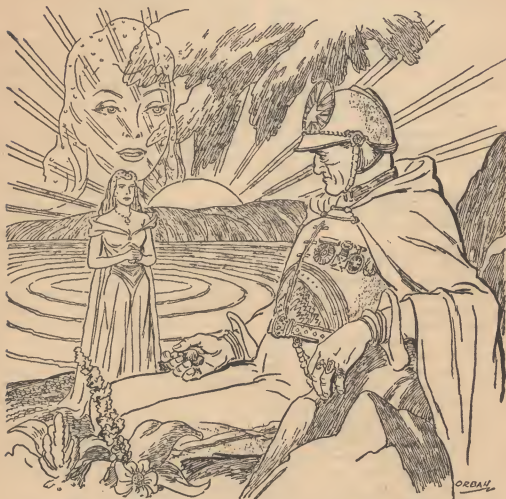
(Signed) JEROME BIXBY,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of September, 1950.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1952.)

The Emperor must be getting old, they thought, to deal so mercifully with the upstart Jursan Rebels—which was quite true. He was not too young to dream . . .



Fyrl weighed a pebble in his hand. "You expect to be executed," he stated flatly.

the envoy, Her

by H. B. Fyfe

DESPITE THE CONCENTRATED patrol defenses, the Emperor's space yacht slipped down to the surface of Klo, second moon of Jursa, without incident. Only recently, such a show of force would have drawn a flight of torpedo rockets from the re-

bellious planet; but the Jursan agitators for a scientific renaissance had at last been beaten to their knees.

A landing tube was connected between the ship and the transparent dome that had been constructed on this airless satellite for the convenience of the lord of the system. Notables in military posts or present on some other excuse gathered to greet their master.

"By Pollux!" gasped one onlooker. "Those guards must all be seven feet tall!"

The file of magnificent soldiers, who gave the impression of being almost entirely armor-plated, deployed on either side of the landing tube exit. They were followed by a figure glittering enough to be an emperor; but since he was attended by only four officials in bejeweled scarlet the crowd recognized him for a chamberlain.

"His Illustrious Sublimity the Lord Vyrtil, Viceroy for Terra, Emperor of Pollux, and of all its fourteen planets, and of all their thirty-seven satellites, and of all the nations thereon, Co-ordinator of the planet Hebryxid—"

It went on at some length, but the man who led the next little parade out of the landing tube paid no heed. The part about Terra was a vestige of centuries before communications had lapsed, and served no purpose but to remind him that new contact with the original planet was one of the Jursans' aims. The rest of his titles he could, by now, recite backwards.

The crowd of officialdom gaped at him as he stood there. He was a tall man, which conveniently helped conceal a tendency toward obesity. Under the excess tissue, his face had a massive strength, with broad bones and jutting chin and nose; but the gray eyes were weary and cynical.

"Wilkins!" he ordered in a bored monotone. "Find which yokel is in charge, and burn a jet under him!"

A RESPLENDENT AIDE hustled forward to where the official in charge of the dome was wetting his lips over his rehearsed greeting. It was quickly made plain that His Illustrious Sublimity desired transportation and a look at the quarters he would have to put up

with until the jackals on Jursa came to their senses.

The official had tried to provide for every known imperial fancy. He smirked delightfully when Vyrtil caught sight of the lozards tethered at one side.

"By Pollux!" exclaimed the Emperor, his eye brightening. "We hadn't expected the pleasure of riding till this was over."

"He tells me they have built a forest, Sire," reported the aide. "About half a mile square. At least, you will have some relaxation."

"Good! It is all very well playing the soldier and roughing it informally, but a man must have *something*!"

He surveyed the reptilian mounts that were led forward and chose one whose eight legs were a trifle longer than average. With reasonable agility, considering his bulk, he hoisted himself into the saddle and set off toward the miniature palace awaiting him. His guardsmen trotted alongside while the rest of his retinue mounted and followed as best they could.

He drew rein once, to gaze up through the dome at the yellow-green disk of Jursa. Wilkins overtook him.

"Note the dark line in the southern hemisphere, Sire," he said. "The result of Marshal Tzyfol's sweep—the one that broke through their fleets and led to their plea for terms."

"Excellent!" said the Emperor. He lowered his gaze and stretched his neck uncomfortably. Vyrtil was unaccustomed to looking up at anything or anybody. "They will bear our mark."

"It will teach them the lesson they deserve," agreed Wilkins dutifully. "Autonomy, indeed!"

"Quite," said Vyrtil, urging his lozard forward. "Who are those fools to think they can demand exemption from established imperial laws . . . they should be satisfied with the standard textbooks and forget their puttering! Ha—what's this?"

He pulled up before a small replica of the palace.

"The dome engineer built it for your wives, Sire."

"Our wives?"

"Twenty of them volunteered to share the rigors of the campaign. Their special

transport arrived just before us."

"Humph!" grunted Vyrtl, riding past.

EARLY the next morning, after the engineers had arranged a dawn for his benefit, Vyrtl called a council of his commanders. Chief-of-Staff Robert Tzyfol reported on the situation.

The rebellious Jursans were sending a representative to ask for terms. In the Marshal's strongly expressed opinion, no leniency was necessary. The imperial fleets were slowly but surely stamping out all resistance, making Jursa unlivable.

"Abject submission is their only course," he declared.

It was the sort of declaration with which Vyrtl might have agreed, had he been able to voice it first.

As it was, he announced that he would keep it in mind when judging the fate of the rebels. He had no inclination to destroy a perfectly good, tax-paying planet if he could whip its inhabitants into line by other means.

He ended the conference by stating his intention to ride in the artificial forest. He enjoyed the glances of relief among the generals—especially the older and more brittle ones—when he gave them leave to resume their military duties instead of attending him.

A few hours later, Wilkins found Vyrtl and a small retinue resting beside a pool at the edge of the forest.

"The rebel envoy has arrived, Sire," he reported.

Vyrtl kicked a pebble into the pool and spat after it. "We shall see him immediately," he announced. "No use wasting ceremony on the villain."

Returning to the palace, he strode into the audience chamber and signaled for the envoy to be admitted. Still warm from his ride and insultingly disheveled, he sat in the imitation of the great throne on his capital planet, Hebryxid.

"If he isn't brisk," he muttered to Wilkins, "we may teach him promptness by hunting him through the forest tomorrow."

Above the whispers of hastily assembled officers, courtiers, and a few of Vyrtl's

wives, a chamberlain announced, "The Jursan envoy, Daphne Foster."

"A woman?" murmured Vyrtl.

"So it seems. She looks quite . . . distinguished."

"Ha! The witty Wilkins! A pretty choice of words."

The woman approached the throne amid a low buzz from Vyrtl's attendants, and bowed gracefully. Gracefully but not too abjectly, considering the situation and his own position, Vyrtl thought. She raised her head and endured his deliberate scrutiny.

She *would* have to be a rebel, Vyrtl told himself. He supposed they had scoured all Jursa for a real beauty to dazzle him; but they would discover that it would not work.

At first glance, she had seemed slim, but he saw now that, though tall, she was very well proportioned. A net of tiny, glittering jewels was woven into the black hair that hung to her shoulders. Her features were regular, but expressively alive compared to the artificial placidity of the court beauties.

But what disturbed the Emperor of Pollux most was the way she looked at him! He felt that it was stretching diplomacy a bit far.

A smile in deep blue eyes was pleasant, when someone was sufficiently accomplished to muster it in his presence; but this was a shade too familiar. She seemed to put herself on a level with him—as if to share an amusement beyond the others present.

The next moment, he was trying to decide just what quality made hers the most beautiful female voice he had ever heard. Consequently, he missed most of the formula about "the gratitude of all Jursa" at his receiving "his humble slave."

THAT SMILE lit the blue eyes again.

It was hard to tell if a ghost of it lingered at the corners of the full lips, but the total effect was of anything but humility. He pulled himself together, aware that Wilkins had noticed his hesitation.

"So the Jursans seek to soften our just anger?" he said. "They send their sur-

render by one who is obviously the loveliest jewel of their misguided world."

A few of the courtiers snickered dutifully. Vyrtil was annoyed; he had not meant to be funny. He glanced swiftly at the half-dozen wives present, but their expressions showed no jealousy. He decided that the empty-headed creatures had at least learned not to embarrass him publicly.

"Your Illustrious Sublimity is too gracious," replied the envoy. "I regret that my message is not unqualified surrender."

Vyrtil frowned. "You dare ask terms?"

"I must carry out the commands laid upon me by the Council."

She smiled into his eyes and made a rueful little gesture with both hands, which she allowed to fall gracefully to her sides. Vyrtil's gaze was led up and down her figure again.

He forced himself to meet her glance. Rather than expressing any resentment of his appraisal, it suggested that her resistance to his demands would be merely formal.

They've sent me a clever one, he thought, but they will find I cannot be bought off so cheaply. Still, it can do no harm to show that Vyrtil can be the diplomat as well as a soldier.

"We are unprepared for any discussion," he said aloud. "Since we are not disposed, however, to be hasty in our judgement, you may wait upon us in the council chamber in two hours."

The envoy stepped lithely aside when he rose. With some difficulty, Vyrtil kept his eyes front as he strode from the hall with Wilkins and his personal guards at his heels. He hastened to his own chambers for a bath and change of clothes.

He allowed himself to be bathed, scented, and dressed in the most imperial costume he had brought from Hebraxid. Blonde Xota, his official favorite who had taken no chance of losing her place by absence from his side, admired his dazzling jewels and scarlet silks extravagantly. Vyrtil permitted her to serve him a light lunch, paying little attention to her chatter.

Once, when he had taken her from the Co-ordinator of his sixth planet, he had

fancied himself in love with her; now he merely amused himself guessing from day to day to whom she sold her supposed influence. He sometimes wondered if any wife he owned were innocent of spying.

He rose, summoned Wilkins, and led a small procession to the council chamber. They found the necessary quota of high officers waiting. Daphne Foster was summoned.

Vyrtil took his place on a dais at the head of the table, and his aide arranged the gold-stiffened ceremonial robe. The generals made little professional jokes, each striving to act as if the victory had been mostly his own doing. Even the lean Chief of Staff, Tzyfol, looked satiated.

The Jursan envoy was announced.

ONCE AGAIN, Vyrtil was so fascinated by the girl that he paid scant heed to the ceremonious greetings. He decided she was younger than he had thought earlier.

Finally, the conference got down to business.

"My people," said Daphne Foster, "ask but a few minor concessions, which we believe will benefit the remainder of the Empire as much as Jursa."

"We are disposed to believe your good intentions," said Vyrtil encouragingly.

He caught himself smiling, and immediately resumed the mask of dignity.

The Jursans, it developed, would give up demands for autonomy and resume allegiance to the Empire. They pleaded, however, for freedom of scientific research, promising that their discoveries would be placed promptly at Vyrtil's disposal.

In the matter of indemnities, they were willing, Daphne Foster said with an intimate glance for Vyrtil alone, to rely upon his generosity. They asked only that they be allowed a reasonable time to restore the damage suffered in the fighting and that they be permitted to make part of the payments in the technical equipment they were so skilled at manufacturing.

Some of the officers raised objections that Vyrtil thought well-put, but he overruled them. The main point, he pronounced, was to restore a valuable pos-

session to productivity. There would be no looting and destruction.

He felt less sure of himself when old Tzyfol protested that free research was one of the roots of the trouble. Consequently, perhaps, the imperial glare that silenced the Marshal was the more withering.

After that, Vyrtl sat back and allowed his cohorts to promulgate a number of minor, harrassing conditions. These would satisfy their egos to some degree, keep the Jursans aware of the folly of questioning his authority again, and show their envoy how things might have gone had Vyrtl not been merciful.

In the end, he added one condition of his own.

"It will be necessary," he said, "to hold frequent conferences on these affairs. If the Jursan Council should appoint their envoy as permanent ambassador to our court, we should be inclined to approve."

It was tantamount to a command, but the girl showed no resentment. Not that Vyrtl expected anything so rash as outward reluctance—but a lifetime of piercing the flattery of courtiers had made him a shrewd reader of facial expressions.

He granted permission for an immediate broadcasting of the treaty, overriding Tzyfol's desire for deeper consideration in favor of Daphne Foster's plea that delay would cost lives.

After having copies of the rather simple document drawn up for the facsimile broadcasters, Vyrtl gave her leave to depart. Without seeming to watch, he admired her gait as she walked from the conference chamber.

AFTERWARDS, he left the generals to their post-mortem and retired with Wilkins to a private balcony for a bottle of wine.

"How did it go?" he asked, leaning back more comfortably when his aide had removed the heavy robe.

"You were most generous, Sire, or so I thought."

"It is a virtue that requires a public display now and then, to strengthen the roots of the myth that grows from it. Too bad old Tzyfol failed to see that. Why

do you suppose he tried to be obstinate?"

"I expect, Sire, he disliked having an old woman seem to get the better of him after he had won the military victory."

Vyrtl laughed indulgently and sipped his wine.

"Even Tzyfol," added Wilkins, "might have been generous had she been young and pretty. Unfortunately, I suppose, it takes an old head to be an envoy."

The Emperor set his glass down very carefully.

"What did you say?" he demanded evenly.

Wilkins stared, with the expression of a man who fears he may suddenly recall having used an obscene word in polite company, or having bragged falsely and unwittingly of tax-evasion to an imperial collector.

Vyrtl repeated his question in a tone a note higher.

"I-I-I said that if she were young and p-pretty—"

"How old do you think she was?" rasped Vyrtl.

"About s-s-seventy. Maybe seventy-five."

"What?"

He surged to his feet, overturning the table. Immediately the glass doors opening on the balcony were flung back with a splintering crash.

Four gleaming guardsmen charged out with drawn weapons, each obviously aching to become a hero. Wilkins prudently stood rooted, peering at them from the corner of his eye.

Vyrtl recovered his poise with an effort.

"As you were!" he ordered. "Help General Wilkins pick up the table I knocked over. Clumsy thing!"

It was done, and the guard captain apologized for the doors.

"Relax, Wilkins," said Vyrtl when they were again alone. "It just occurred to me that I ought to have another word with that woman. Have someone get hold of her at once!"

He left the disordered balcony and waited in a nearby library. The books lining the walls were real, he noticed idly—another painstaking point by the designer of

the palace.

There Wilkins found him presently, to report that the Jursan envoy was already on her way back to that planet.

"I called the landing field guard," he explained, "but she had already taken off. His spotters swept space for them and got a curve on the ship."

"Of course," mused Vyrtil. "The treaty has been broadcast."

"Shall I have the patrols close in on her rocket?"

"No." The Emperor pondered a moment. "Have a telescreen set up in here so we can speak directly."

A frenzied bustle ensued as Wilkins directed a platoon of awed techs through the process of bringing the mountain to Mohammed. In the end, the Jursan ship was in communication. The aide called for Daphne Foster, then stood aside.

Vyrtil was glad, when she appeared, that Wilkins had placed a deep armchair before the screen for him.

Was *this* the woman with whom he had—?

SHE was still tall, but her white hair gave her the look of the seventy years with which Wilkins had credited her. Deep laugh-wrinkles bracketed the mouth, with more at the corners of the still bright eyes. The delicate bones of her face were more prominent.

There was nevertheless a clear resemblance to the Daphne Foster he had received earlier.

She looks . . . she looked, thought Vyrtil, *as this woman might have looked when she was young . . . or might have wanted to look.*

No, that was not quite it.

As she knew a man would have liked her to look!

The woman on the screen spoke, her eyes smiling into his in a manner that was painfully familiar.

"Your Illustrious Sublimity has become the first to share my little secret."

Vyrtil, with a concentration of will, prevented his eyes from peeping sidelong at Wilkins' expression.

"We are somewhat suprised," he said, knowing it for an asinine remark but

afraid to risk his dignity by being plainer.

"Of course," she said, "I hardly expect it to make any difference in the imperial announcement of peace, but if any clarification is desired of me, I shall be happy to oblige."

Vyrtil thought furiously. Had he actually *said* anything to Wilkins or anyone else? He tried to remember every word spoken at the conference. It seemed to him there had been one or two slips, but they had been taken for imperial witticisms.

No, he was safe enough. The Jursan Council and their technicians naturally must know the "clarification" offered him, but they would know better than to publicize it. He could afford to show no mercy if they did. As things stood, it might be best to stand by his published word.

"We desire," he said slowly, "that you, as ambassador, return immediately. You will have every facility to communicate with your government, to repay the inconvenience."

The old woman stared him in the eye, then bowed silently.

Vyrtil saw that she realized what it might mean. He hoped she would not arrange an "accident" before her ship returned.

He had Wilkins take over and check with the captain of the rocket. It was determined that the best effort would bring the ship back to the dome on Klo about "mid-morning." Vyrtil left orders that the woman was to be brought before him the moment she arrived, and retired for the night.

He found Xota sprawled confidently upon his bed, and kicked her off in a temper. His groping had found no loose object to fling after her as she slunk out the door, and that made his temper worse. He was a long time getting to sleep. . . .

THE NEXT MORNING, he pecked at his breakfast and sneered at the artificial dawn that had been delayed for his benefit.

"Get me a lozard and a squad of guards!" he snarled to Wilkins. "I'll have a run through the woods while I wait."

He left the guards at the fringes of his engineers' forest and rode the eight-legged

reptile recklessly among the huge trunks. Since the builder had artfully omitted all low branches, there was little chance of his knocking his head off.

Towards noon, he paused to rest at the little pool on the edge of the woods. He waved to a group of guards he saw peering at him across an open field of what looked very much like grass. One of the men ran over.

"The Jursan envoy is back, Your Illustrious Sublimity."

Vyrtl sighed.

"Tell General Wilkins to bring her here—immediately."

He turned away and sat upon a flat stone beside the pool.

After a while, he noticed that the ground was liberally supplied with pebbles for casting into the water. He was watching the spreading ripples about fifteen minutes later when he heard approaching voices behind him.

A glance over his shoulder showed him Wilkins and two guards escorting the old woman. He turned away, tossing another pebble into the pool with a half-hearted motion of his arm.

When Wilkins coughed discreetly behind him, he told the aide and the guards to withdraw. He listened to the footsteps until he knew they were beyond range of ordinary conversation.

"You are the same Daphne Foster?" he asked, still facing the pool.

"The same, Your Illustrious Sublimity."

"Let us dispense with formality. Tell me how you did it."

"It is simple . . . in a way. But it requires the use of a not-so-simple instrument."

"Such as I?" he asked, apparently intent upon the water.

"I did not mean Your Illustrious—I did not mean it that way. It is a little triumph of our Jursan technicians, which will shortly be at your disposal. I used it to force an illusion upon you."

"And very cleverly, I admit. Do you have it with you?"

"Yes. It is compact. It merely operates upon the idea that other forces can be used to produce hypnosis besides lights, drugs, and soothing sounds."

"Turn it on!" ordered Vyrtl.

HE WAITED a moment, then twisted around on the stone to face her. There was no sign of the woman he had seen crossing the field. Before him seemed to stand the black-haired, lithe girl.

The only change was in her eyes, which no longer smiled into his so provocatively.

Funny, thought Vyrtl. *When we actually were strangers, she seemed so intimate. Only now does she look at me so coldly.*

"You see?" she said, and started to reach for some switch or button concealed by the jewel at her breast.

Vyrtl stopped her with a gesture.

"You must also be skilled in the sciences of the mind," he remarked. "What I mean is . . . I suppose you never really looked like that?"

She shook her head a trifle ruefully.

"Not quite. Most of it is in your own imagination. We know a good deal about you, Your—"

"You deduced somehow what I would look for," interrupted Vyrtl, nodding. "I can see how a study of the things I chose to have about me—paintings, statues, furnishings, even people—might yield keys to my preferences. You did remarkably well."

He tossed another pebble and stared at the ripples.

"I suppose every man has his ideal of a woman," he said. "I doubt that any man has *seen* his absolute ideal—except me. I wonder if you know what it does to one?"

He chose a flat pebble and sent it skipping across the surface with a vicious snap of his wrist. It bounced three . . . four . . . five times, and sank.

"I presume," said Daphne Foster, breaking a tight little silence, "that you will grant me time to set my affairs in order?"

Vyrtl weighed a pebble in his hand.

"You expect to be executed," he stated flatly.

"Naturally, we knew all along that someone would have to pay for tricking you. The Emperor of Pollux must, after all, maintain his dignity."

Vyrtl wondered if he had detected a note of irony in the musical voice. He marveled anew at the pleasure of listening to

her. But of course, he reminded himself, he heard his own imagined ideal of what a lovely woman's voice should be.

"No," he said abruptly, swinging about. "I am merely going to insist that you fulfill the terms of the agreement by remaining at my court. I want you near me from now on."

She blinked at that.

"But, surely . . . you must realize . . . it is only an illusion!" she protested.

"As am I," said Vyril. "A figurehead imprisoned in a maze of formalities and so-called pleasures."

HE SAW that she could not understand what could be wrong with his position.

"Once, when I was very young," he said, "I thought I would rule. But fourteen planets require a whole *council* of co-ordinators! I gave up that idea and tried to enjoy myself."

She stared at him uncertainly. He waved a hand at the artificial forest.

"It has been like that ever since. They fall all over themselves to devise new ways of getting my attention and to present pleasures and entertainment I am incapable of enjoying. I have more wealth than I can estimate, I sometimes forget which palace I am in, even my wives look alike by now."

"I must sympathize with Your Illustrious Sublimity."

He flung her a hard stare.

"Perhaps you ought! Even my generals and their soldiers have their dreams—of

conquest or loot. The engineer who built this dome pictures himself famous and admired. Wilkins is proud of his influence, and other courtiers have visions of doing away with Wilkins and replacing him."

He stood up restlessly.

"You will laugh at me, I know—but there is little enjoyment in life when every whim is catered to at a snap of one's fingers. What have I to *desire*?"

"I see." She nodded slowly. "The old saying about the pleasure of anticipation outweighing that of attainment."

"You should know. You Jursans and your scientific renaissance, your goal of contacting Terra again."

He beckoned to Wilkins and the two guards. They ran eagerly across the grass.

"You see?" he snorted. "Sometimes I almost wish they would ignore me!"

He looked at her and saw the blue eyes achieve their knowing, amused smile once more.

"That's right," he said, smiling back. "Now I shall have something to keep my thoughts from becoming dull and bored. A man needs some impossible dream for moments when he wants to relax."

Wilkins panted up, trying to look alert and willing.

"The unattainable Lady Daphne will accompany us to our capital," said Vyril. "Make the necessary arrangements."

He enjoyed the way his aide covered up a momentary bewilderment.

No one else will ever, ever understand this, he thought with an unaccustomed thrill of pleasure and amusement.

In the next issue . . .



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On Your Newsstand March 1st!

(Continued from p. 15)

read this, you will wonder how you were ever able to do without my sage comments and witty remarks. Ah, but Tempest Fidgets, or something, and on to my comments on the stories in the NOV. issue:

1. **CARRY ME HOME.** In all seriousness, Bix, this is a wonderful story. Better than Liddell's first. If he keeps on writing this way, I can see where we'll have another Bradbury with us soon. The theme may've been old, but the writing was among the best I have read in your mag, and the plotting was very clever, leading up to a very well-planned dénouement. Congratulations on one of the outstanding sf discoveries of the year (if not of all time).

2. Almost as good was Fredric Brown's very cute sequel to "The Star Mouse." I didn't think it was possible to write a follow-up to this one in the spirit of the original, but I was wrong—Brown has done it. If this one lacked anything at all, it was some of the first story's humor, but it was otherwise very good entertainment. The Vestal cartoons fitted perfectly—I like them better than the Lynch pix for the original yarn. Now that you've landed Brown for one yarn, don't stop there. Give us more by this boy. You have undoubtedly received 999 letters praising this story, in German Dialect. Vell, I vill different be.

3. **CARGO TO CALLISTO.** A fine story. I refuse to comment on the true identity of this guy Drexel, except to say that the B does not stand for Bacteria. If he could get a few more new themes, this author could easily be among your very best.

4. **SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS** — Another new author! And good, too. Holden shows definite promise. He turns out a very clever and amusing piece. That ending was particularly good. One comment—do you think the Sirians could really have been such meatballs? Seemed kinda dimwitted of them not to see through Kram's little hoax. Give us more of the guy, though. He sounds as if he could easily develop into a series character. (No pun intended.)

5. **THE LAST TWO ALIVE.** The novels of late have been falling far behind the shorts. Although cleverly done, this one started off slowly, and just as it was looking good, boom! the ending, and that "unique" twist. I had been hoping that maybe the Galaxy would be saved after all, but no go. And that Adam-and-Eve business has been definitely overworked. At least two of your competitors, on the stands now, have stories using it.

6. **MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA.** Clever, clever. More or less an Astounding type piece. Ingenious enough, anyway. Is Lang a new author, or (perish the thought!) a (pen) name? I don't recall having seen him here before.

7. It just goes to show the high standards of PLANET at present, when a MacDonald yarn rates last, John is one of my favorite authors, too. But this piece, while good, cleverly told, and interesting enough, just wasn't any better. Get him to do you a long novel, or at least a novelette. There's no one better for depicting action in a manner calculated to keep you on the edge of your chair. And he has intellect-appeal, too.

On to the features and articles. Hooray! You've brought back the feature flash. Goody. Hmumm.

Blish on Dianetics. No comment here. Ackerman. Not again! This guy has been appearing in just about every stf mag there is, with an article (usually with pictures) on either "Rocketship X-M" or "Destination Moon." Does he know where the body is buried or something?

Ah, Le Viz. I refuse to believe that "Rodric Cadwallerder Drinkwater" exists. He is obviously a penname for someone who is afraid to write in under his own name. Nobody, born with a name like that, would keep it.

I note that all of your letter-writers didn't vote this time. Perhaps this is because you haven't emphasized this sufficiently. There is scant mention of the Vizigraph contest in your comments. For the benefit of new readers, I suggest you explain this. I wouldn't want to miss out on a pic.

Surprised that all of your readers didn't like **THE SKY IS FALLING** as much as I did. Wonder what the reaction will be on Liddell's latest.

My votes, and then I depart. 1) Joe Gibson. 2) Ray H. Ramsay. 3) Bob Silverberg. (Hi Bob! You vote for me and I'll vote for you.)—is that legal?

See where Mitchell Badler doesn't like the old style letter. Just to annoy him...

Mounting my worple (Gruzaks are out of fashion), and slinging my Zap-gun across my muscular, sunbronzed shoulders, I gallop off into the purple dusk. And as I disappear over the horizon, a faint cry comes echoing back—"I'll be back next time!"

Fantasticornily yours,

KEN BEALE

Okay, Slopalong, we'll be waiting—and the gimmick on pic-awards is as follows: If you write a letter to the Vizigraph, and if we print it (haven't space for 'em all, you know), and if it is later selected by reader-vote as one of the three best letters in the issue in which it appeared, you just drop us a card naming an original illustration from that issue and we'll send it to you for keeps. Winners—Good Lord, Beale just fell off his Worple!—winners are announced, in order, in every Vizigraph: 1st place winner chooses one pic, and gets it; 2nd place winner chooses two, in case winner number one makes off with his first choice; 3rd place winner chooses three for the same reason—so he'll have something left if his first two choices mysteriously disappear. Letters should be typewritten (double-spaced, please) on one side of the paper, no more than three pages long—preferably around two—and, cockeyed or cerebral, snarls or sweet nothings, all letters are equally welcome.

Excuse us now, while we go pick up Beale...

ROCKETSHIP X-MINCEMAT

5 West 4th Street,
Mt. Vernon, N. Y.

DEAR SIR:

I have been reading P.S. for years, but never took the trouble to write a letter, because you usually print good stuff, or at least readable, BUT, why on Earth, (or anywhere, for that matter), did you give a feature spot to that blurb about **ROCKETSHIP X-M**?

If an article extolling the virtues of any S-F
(Continued on p. 109)



All space was electrified as that harsh challenge rang out . . . but John Endlich hesitated. For he saw beyond his own murder—saw the horror and destruction his death would unleash—and knew he dared not fight back!

ASTEROID of FEAR

by **RAYMOND
Z. GALLUN**

THE SPACE SHIP LANDED briefly, and John Endlich lifted the huge Asteroids Homesteaders Office box, which contained everything from a prefabricated house to toothbrushes for his family, down from the hold-port without help or visible effort.

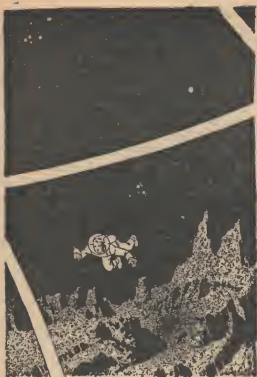
In the tiny gravity of the asteroid, Vesta, doing this was no trouble at all. But beyond this point the situation was—bitter.

His two kids, Bubs, seven, and Evelyn, nine—clad in space-suits that were slightly oversize to allow for the growth of young bodies—were both bawling. He could hear them through his oxygen-helmet radio-phones.

Around him, under the airless sky of space, stretched desolation that he'd of course known about beforehand—but which now had assumed that special and terrible starkness of reality.

At his elbow, his wife, Rose, her heart-shaped face and grey eyes framed by the wide face-window of her armor, was trying desperately to choke back tears, and be brave.

Endlich's voice was steely . . . "Sorry to do things like this—but it's your way!"



"Remember—we've *got* to make good here, Johnny," she was saying. "Remember what the Homesteaders Office people told us—that with modern equipment and the right frame of mind, life can be nice out here. It's worked on other asteroids. What if we are the first farmers to come to Vesta? . . . Don't listen to those crazy miners! They're just kidding us! Don't listen to them! And don't, for gosh sakes, get sore . . ."

Rose's words were now like dim echoes of his conscience, and of his recent grim determination to master his hot temper, his sensitiveness, his wanderlust, and his penchant for poker and the social glass—qualities of an otherwise agreeable and industrious nature, that, on Earth, had always been his undoing. Recently, back in Illinois, he had even spent six months in jail for all but inflicting murder with his bare fists on a bullying neighbor whom he had caught whipping a horse. Sure—but during those six months his farm, the fifth he'd tried to run in scattered parts of North America, had gone to weeds in spite of Rose's valiant efforts to take care of it alone . . .

Oh, yes—the lessons of all that past personal history should be strong in his mind. But now will power and Rose's frightened tones of wisdom both seemed to fade away in his brain, as jeering words from another source continued to drive jagged splinters into the weakest portion of his soul:

"Hi, you hydroponic pun'kin-head! . . . How yuh like your new claim? . . . Nice, ain't it? How about some fresh turnips? . . . Good luck, yuh greenhorn . . . Hiyuh, papa! Tied to baby's diaper suspenders! . . . Let the poor dope alone, guys . . . Snooty . . . Won't take our likker, hunh? Won't take our money . . . Wifey's boy! Let's make him sociable . . . Haw-Haw-haw . . . Hydroponic pun'kin-head! . . ."

It was a medley of coarse voices and laughter, matching the row of a dozen coarse faces and grins that lined the viewpoints of the ship. These men were asteroid miners, space-hardened and space-twisted. They'd been back to Earth for a while, to raise hell and freshen up, and spend the money in their then-bulging pockets. Com-

ing out again from Earth, across the orbit of Mars to the asteroid belt, they had had the Endlichs as fellow passengers.

John Endlich had battled valiantly with his feeble side, and with his social inclinations, all through that long, dreary voyage, to keep clear of the inevitable griefs that were sure to come to a chap like himself from involvement with such characters. In the main, it had been a rather tattered victory. But now, at the final moment of bleak anticlimax, they took their revenge in guffaws and ridicule, hurling the noise at him through the radiophones of the space-suit helmets that they held in their laps—space-suits being always kept handy beneath the traveler-seats of every interplanetary vessel.

" . . . Haw-haw-haw! Drop over to our camp sometime for a little drink, and a little game, eh, pantiywaist? Tain't far. Sure—just drop in on us when the pressure of domesticity in this beootiful cuntry gets you down . . . When the turnips get you down! Haw-haw-haw! Bring the wife along . . . She's kinda pretty. Ought to have a man-size fella . . . Just ask for me—Alf Neely! Haw-haw-haw!"

Yeah, Alf Neely was the loudest and the ugliest of John Endlich's baiters. He had gigantic arms and shoulders, small squinty eyes, and a pendulous nose. "Haw-haw-haw! . . ."

And the others, yelling and hooting, made it a pack: "Man—don't he wish he was back in Podunk! . . . What!—no tomatas, Dutch? . . . What did they tell yuh back at the Homestead office in Chicago?—that we were in de-e-esperate need of fresh vegetables out here? Well, where are they, papa? . . . Haw-haw-haw! . . ."

UNDER THE BARRAGE John Endlich's last shreds of common-sense were all but blotted out by the red murk of fury. He was small and broad—a stolid-looking thirty-two years old. But now his round and usually placid face was as red as a fiery moon, and his underlip curled in a snarl. He might have taken the savage ribbing more calmly. But there was too much grim fact behind what these asteroid miners said. Besides, out here he had thought that he would have a better

chance to lick the weaknesses in himself—because he'd *have* to work to keep his family alive; because he'd been told that there'd be no one around to distract him from duty. Yah! The irony of that, now, was maddening.

For the moment John Endlich was speechless and strangled—but like an ignited firecracker. Uhunh—ready to explode. His hard body hunched, as if ready to spring. And the baiting waxed louder. It was like the yammering of crows, or the roar of a wild surf in his ears. Then came the last straw. The kids had kept on bawling—more and more violently. But now they got down to verbal explanations of what they thought was the matter:

"Wa-aa-aa-a-ahh-h! Papa—we wanna-go-o-o—hom-m-mm-e! . . ."

The timing could not have been better—or worse. The shrieks and howls of mirth from the miners, a moment ago, were as nothing to what they were now.

"Ho-ho-ho! Tell it to Daddy, kids! . . . Ho-ho-ho! That was a mouthful . . . Ho-ho-ho-ho! Wow! . . ."

There is a point at which an extremity of masculine embarrassment can lead to but one thing—mayhem. Whether the latter is to be inflicted on the attacked or the attacker remains the only question mark.

"I'll get you, Alf Neely!" Endlich snarled. "Right now! And I'll get all the damned, hell-bitten rest of you guys!"

Endlich was hardly lacking in vigor, himself. Like a squat but streamlined fighting rooster, rendered a hundred times more agile by the puny gravity, he would have reached the hold-port threshold in a single lithe skip—had not Rose, despairing, grabbed him around the middle to restrain him. Together they slid several yards across the dried-out surface of the asteroid.

"Don't, Johnny—please don't!" she waived.

Her begging could not have stopped him. Nor could her physical interference—for more than an instant. Nor could his conscience, nor his recent determination to keep out of trouble. Not the certainty of being torn limb from limb, and not hell, itself, could have held him back, anymore, then.

Yet he was brought to a halt. It cer-

tainly wasn't cowardice that accomplished this. No.

Suddenly there was no laughter among the miners. But in a body they arose from their traveler-seats aboard the ship. Suddenly there was no more humor in their faces beyond the viewports. They were itching to be assaulted. The glitter in Alf Neely's small eyes was about as reassuring as the glitter in the eyes of a slightly prankish gorilla.

"We're waitin' for yuh, Mr. Civilization," he rumbled softly.

AFTER THAT, all space was still—electrified. The icy stars gleamed in the black sky. The shrunken sun looked on. And John Endlich saw beyond his own murder. To the thought of his kids—and his wife—left alone out here, hundreds of millions of miles from Earth, and real law and order—with these lugs. These guys who had been starved emotionally, and warped inside by raw space. Coldness crawled into John Endlich's guts, and seemed to twist steel hooks there, making him sick. The silence of a vacuum, and of unthinkable distances, and of ghostly remains which must be left on this fragment of a world that had blown up, maybe fifty million or more years ago, added its weight to John Endlich's feelings.

And for his family, he was scared. What hell could not have accomplished, became fact. His almost suicidal impulse to inflict violence on his tormenters was strangled, bottled-up—brutally repressed, and left to impose the pangs of neurosis on his tormented soul. Narrowing domesticity had won a battle.

Except, of course, that what he had already said to Alf Neely and Friends was sufficient to start the Juggernaut that they represented, rolling. As he picked himself and Rose up from the ground, he saw that the miners were grimly donning their space-suits, in preparation to their coming out of the ship to lay him low.

"Oh—tired, hunh. Pun'kin-head?" Alf Neely growled. "It don't matter, Dutch. We'll finish you off without you liftin' a finger!"

In John Endlich the rage of intolerable insults still seethed. But there was no

question, now, of outcome between it and the brassy taste of danger on his tongue. He knew that even knuckling down, and changing from man to worm to take back his fighting words, couldn't do any good. He felt like a martyr, left with his family in a Roman arena, while the lions approached. His butchery was as good as over . . .

Reprieve came presumably by way of the good-sense of the pilot of the space ship. The hold-port was closed abruptly by a mechanism that could be operated only from the main control-board. The rocket jets of the craft emitted a single weak burst of flame. Like a boulder grown agile and flighty, the ship leaped from the landscape, and arced outward toward the stars, to curve around the asteroid and disappear behind the scene's jagged brim. The craft had gone to make its next and final stop—among the air-domes of the huge mining camp on the other side of Vesta—the side of torn rocks and rich radioactive ores.

But before the ship had vanished from sight, John Endlich heard Alf Neely's grim promise in his helmet radiophones: "We'll be back tonight, Greenhorn. Lots of times we work night-shift—when it's daytime on this side of Vesta. We'll be free. Stick around. I'll rub what's left of you in the dust of your claim!"

Endlich was alone, then, with the fright in his wife's eyes, the squalling of his children, and his own abysmal disgust and worry.

For once he ceased to be a gentle parent. "Bubs! Evelyn!" he snapped. "Shud-d-d—up-p-p! . . ."

The startled silence which ensued was his first personal victory on Vesta. But the silence, itself, was an insidious enemy. It made his ears ring. It made even his audible pulsebeats seemed to ache. It bored into his nerves like a drill. When, after a moment, Rose spoke quaveringly, he was almost grateful:

"What do we do, Johnny? We've still got to do what we're supposed to do, don't we?"

Whereupon John Endlich allowed himself the luxury and the slight relief of a torrent of silent cussing inside his head.

Damn the obvious questions of women! Damn the miners. Damn the A.H.O.—the Asteroids Homesteaders Office—and their corny slogans and posters, meant to hook suckers like himself! Damn his own dumb hide! Damn the mighty urge to get drunk! Damn all the bitter circumstances that made doing so impossible. Damn! Damn! Damn!

Finished with this orgy, he said meekly: "I guess so, Hon."

ALL MEMBERS of the Endlich family had been looking around them at the weird Vestal landscape. Through John Endlich's mind again there flashed a picture of what this asteroid was like. At the Asteroids Homesteaders' School in Chicago, where his dependents and he had been given several weeks of orientation instruction, suitable to their separate needs, he had been shown diagrams and photographs of Vesta. Later, he had of course seen it from space.

It was not round, like a major planet or most moons. Rather, it was like a bomb-fragment; or even more like a shard of a gigantic broken vase. It was several hundred miles long, and half as thick. One side of it—this side—was curved; for it had been a segment of the surface of the shattered planet from which all of the asteroids had come. The other side was jagged and broken, for it had been torn from the mesoderm of that tortured mother world.

From the desolation of his own thoughts, in which the ogre-form of Alf Neely lurked with its pendent promise of catastrophe soon to come, and from his own view of other desolation all around him, John Endlich was suddenly distracted by the comments of his kids. All at once, conforming to the changeable weather of children's natures regardless of circumstance, their mood had once more turned bright and adventurous.

"Look, Pop," Bubs chirped, his round red face beaming now from his helmet face-window, in spite of his undried tears. "This land all around here was fields once! You can even see the rows of some kind of stubble! Like corn-stubble! And over there's a—a—almost like a fence! An' up there is hills with trees on 'em—some

of 'em not even knocked over. But everything is all dried-out and black and grey and dead! Gosh!"

"We can see all that, Dopey!" Evelyn, who was older, snapped at Bubs. "We know that something like people lived on a regular planet here, awful long ago. Why don't you look over the other way? There's the house—and maybe the barn and the sheds and the old garden!"

Bubs turned around. His eyes got very big. "Oh! O-ooh-h-h!" he gasped in wonder. "Pop! Mom! Look! Don't you see? . . ."

"Yeah, we see, Bubs," John Endlich answered.

For a long moment he'd been staring at those blocklike structures. One—maybe the house—was of grey stone. It had odd, triangular windows, which may once have been glazed. Some of the others were of a blackened material—perhaps cellulose. Wood, that is. All of the buildings were pushed askew, and partly crumpled from top to bottom, like great cardboard cartons that had been half crushed.

Endlich's imagination seemed forced to follow a groove, trying to picture that last terrible moment, fifty-million years ago. Had the blast been caused by natural atomic forces at the heart of the planet, as one theory claimed? Or had a great bomb, as large as an oversized meteor, come self-propelled from space, to bury itself deep in that ancient world? A world as big as Mars, its possible enemy—whose weird inhabitants had been wiped out, in a less spectacular way, perhaps in the same conflict?

Endlich's mind grabbed at that brief instant of explosion. The awful jolt, which must have ended all consciousness, and all capacity for eyes to see what followed. Perhaps there was a short and terrible passing of flame. But in swift seconds, great chunks of the planet's crust must have been hurled outward. In a moment the flame must have died, dissipated with the suddenly vanishing atmosphere, into the cold vacuum of the void. Almost instantly, the sky, which had been deep blue before, must have turned to its present black, with the voidal stars blazing. There had been no air left to sustain combustion,

so buildings and trees had not continued to burn, if there had been time at all to ignite them. And, with the same swiftness, all remaining artifacts and surface features of this chip of a world's crust that was Vesta, had been plunged into the dual preservatives of the interplanetary regions—deep-freeze and all but absolute dryness. Yes—the motion of the few scattered molecules in space was very fast—indicating a high temperature. But without substance to be hot, there can be no heat. And so few molecules were there in the void, that while the concept of a "hot" space remained true, it became tangled at once with the fact that a *practically* complete vacuum can have *practically* no temperature. Which meant—again in practice—all but absolute zero.

John Endlich knew. He'd heard the lectures at the Homesteaders' School. Here was a ghost-land, hundreds of square miles in extent—a region that had been shifted in a few seconds, from the full prime of life and motion, to moveless and timeless silence. It was like the mummy of a man. In its presence there was a chill, a revulsion, and yet a fascination.

THE KIDS continued to jabber—more excitedly now than before. "Pop! Mom!" Bubs urged. "Let's go look inside them buildings! Maybe the *things* are still there! The people, I mean. All black and dried up, like the one in the showcase at school; four tentacles they had instead of arms and legs, the teacher said!"

"Sure! Let's go!" Evelyn joined in. "I'm not scared to!"

Yeah, kids' tastes could be pretty gruesome. When you thought most that you had to shelter them from horror, they were less bothered by it than you were. John Endlich's lips made a sour line.

"Stay here, the pair of you!" Rose ordered.

"Aw—Mom—" Evelyn began to protest.

"You heard me the first time," their mother answered.

John Endlich moved to the great box, which had come with them from Earth. The nervous tension that tore at him—unpleasant and chilling, driving him toward

straining effort—was more than the result of the shameful and embarrassing memory of his very recent trouble with Alf Neely and Companions, and the certainty of more trouble to come from that source. For there was another and even worse enemy. Endlich knew what it was—

The awful silence.

He still looked shamefaced and furious; but now he felt a gentler sharing of circumstances. "We'll let the snooping go till later, kids," he growled. "Right now we gotta do what we gotta do—"

The youngsters seemed to join up with his mood. As he tore the pinchbar, which had been conveniently attached to the side of the box, free of its staples, and proceeded to break out supplies, their whimsical musings fell close to what he was thinking.

"Vesta," Evelyn said. "They told us at school—remember? Vesta was the old Roman goddess of hearth and home. Funny—hunh—Dad?"

Bubs' fancy was vivid, too. "Look, Pop!" he said again, pointing to a ribbon of what might be concrete, cracked and crumpled as by a terrific quake, curving away toward the hills, and the broken mountains beyond. "That was a road! Can't you almost hear some kinda cars and trucks goin' by?"

John Endlich's wife, helping him open the great box, also had things to say, in spite of the worry showing in her face. She touched the dessicated soil with a gauntleted hand. "Johnny," she remarked wonderingly. "You can see the splash-marks of the last rain that ever fell here—"

"Yeah," Endlich growled without any further comment. Inside himself, he was fighting the battle of lost things. The blue sky. The shifting beauty of clouds in sunshine. The warm whisper of wind in trees. The rattle of traffic. The babble of water. The buzz of insects. The smell of flowers. The sight of grass waving . . . In short, all the evidences of life.

"A lot of things that was here once, we'll bring back, won't we, Pop?" Bubs questioned with astonishing maturity.

"Hope so," John Endlich answered, keeping his doubts hidden behind gruffness. Maybe it was a grim joke that here

and now every force in himself was concentrated on substantial objectives—to the exclusion of his defects. The drive in him was to end the maddening silence, and to rub out the mood of harsh barrenness, and his own aching homesickness, by struggling to bring back a little beauty of scenery, and a little of living motion. It was a civilized urge, a home-building urge, maybe a narrow urge. But how could anybody stand being here very long, unless such things were done? If they ever could be. Maybe, willfully, he had led himself into a grimmer trap than it had even seemed to be—or than he had ever wanted . . .

INSIDE his space suit, he had begun to sweat furiously. And it was more because of the tension of his nerves than because of the vigor with which he pried his pinchbar, doing the first task which had to be done. Steel ribbons were snapped, nails were yanked silently from the great box, boards were jerked loose.

In another minute John Endlich and his wife were setting up an airtight tent, which, when the time came, could be inflated from compressed-air bottles. They worked somewhat awkwardly, for their instruction period had been brief, and they were green; but the job was speedily finished. The first requirement—shelter—was assured.

Digging again into the vast and varied contents of the box, John Endlich found some things he had not expected—a fine rifle, a pistol and ammunition. At which moment an ironic imp seemed to sit on his shoulder, and laugh derisively. Umhm-m—the Asteroids Homesteaders Office had filled these boxes according to a precise survey of the needs of a peaceful settler on Vesta.

It was like Bubs, with the inquisitiveness of a seven-year-old, to ask: "What did they think we needed guns for, when they knew there was no rabbits to shoot at?"

"I guess they kind of suspected there'd be guys like Alf Neely, son," John Endlich answered dryly. "Even if they didn't tell us about it."

The next task prescribed by the Homesteaders' School was to secure a supply of

air and water in quantity. Again, following the instructions they had received, the Endlichs uncrated and set up an atom-driven drill. In an hour it had bored to a depth of five-hundred feet. Hauling up the drill, Endlich lowered an electric heating unit on a cable from an atomic power-cell, and then capped the casing pipe.

Yes, strangely enough there was still sufficient water beneath the surface of Vesta. Its parent planet, like the Earth, had had water in its crust, that could be tapped by means of wells. And so suddenly had Vesta been chilled in the cold of space at the time of the parent body's explosion, that this water had not had a chance to dissipate itself as vapor into the void, but had been frozen solid. The drying soil above it had formed a tough shell, which had protected the ice beneath from disappearance through sublimation . . .

Drill down to it, melt it with heat, and it was water again, ready to be pumped and put to use.

And water, by electrolysis, was also an easy source of oxygen to breathe . . . The soil, once thawed over a few acres, would also yield considerable nitrogen and carbon dioxide—the makings of many cubic meters of atmosphere. The A. H. O. survey expeditions, here on Vesta and on other similar asteroids which were crustal chips of the original planet, had done their work well, pathfinding a means of survival here.

When John Endlich pumped the first turbid liquid, which immediately froze again in the surface cold, he might, under other, better circumstances, have felt like cheering. His well was a success. But his tense mind was racing far ahead to all the endless tasks that were yet to be done, to make any sense at all out of his claim. Besides, the short day—eighteen hours long instead of twenty-four, and already far advanced at the time of his tumultuous landing—was drawing to a close.

"It'll be dark here mighty quick, Johnny," Rose said. She was looking scared, again.

JOHN ENDLICH considered setting up floodlights, and working on through the hours of darkness. But such lights

would be a dangerous beacon for prowlers; and when you were inside their area of illumination, it was difficult to see into the gloom beyond.

Still, one did not know if the mask of darkness did not afford a greater invitation to those with evil intent. For a long moment, Endlich was in an agony of indecision. Then he said:

"We'll knock off from work now—get in the tent, eat supper, maybe sleep . . ."

But he was remembering Neely's promise to return tonight.

In another minute the small but dazzling sun had disappeared behind the broken mountains, as Vesta, unspherical and malformed, tumbled rather than rotated on its center of gravity. And several hours later, amid heavy cooking odors inside the now inflated plastic bubble that was the tent, Endlich was sprawled on his stomach, unable, through well-founded worry, even to remove his space suit or to allow his family to do so, though there was breathable air around them. They lay with their helmet face-windows open. Rose and Evelyn breathed evenly in peaceful sleep.

Bubs, trying to be very much a man, battled slumber and yawns, and kept his dad company with scraps of conversation. "Let 'em come, Pop," he said cheerfully. "Hope they do. We'll shoot 'em all. Won't we, pop? You got the rifle and the pistol ready, Pop . . ."

Yes, John Endlich had his guns ready beside him, all right—for what it was worth. He wished wryly that things could be as simple as his hero-worshipping son seemed to think. Thank the Lord that Bubs was so trusting, for his own peace of mind—the prankish and savage nature of certain kinds of men, with liquor in their bellies, being what it was. For John Endlich, having been, on occasion, mildly kindred to such men, was well able to understand that nature. And understanding, now, chilled his blood.

Peering from the small plastic windows of the tent, he kept watching for hulking black shapes to silhouette themselves against the stars. And he listened on his helmet phones, for scraps of telltale conversation, exchanged by short-range radio by men in space armor. Once, he thought

he heard a grunt, or a malicious chuckle. But it may have been just vagrant static.

Otherwise, from all around, the stillness of the vacuum was absolute. It was unnerving. On this airless piece of a planet, an enemy could sneak up on you, almost without stealth.

Against that maddening silence, however, Bubs presently had a helpful and unprompted suggestion: "Hey, Pop!" he whispered hoarsely. "Put the side of your helmet against the tent-floor, and listen!"

John Endlich obeyed his kid. In a second cold sweat began to break out on his body, as intermittent thudding noises reached his ear. In the absence of an atmosphere, sounds could still be transmitted through the solid substance of the asteroid.

It took Endlich a moment to realize that the noises came, not from nearby, but from far away, on the other side of Vesta. The thudding was vibrated straight through many miles of solid rock.

"It's nothing, Bubs," he growled. "Nothing but the blasting in the mines."

Bubs said "Oh," as if disappointed. Not long thereafter he was asleep, leaving his harrassed sire to endure the vigil alone. Endlich dared not doze off, to rest a little, even for a moment. He could only wait. If an evil visitation came—as he had been all but sure it must—that would be bad, indeed. If it didn't come—well—that still meant a sleepless night, and the postponement of the inevitable. He couldn't win.

Thus the hours slipped away, until the luminous dial of the clock in the tent—it had been synchronized to Vestal time—told him that dawn was near. That was when, through the ground, he heard the faint scraping. A rustle. It might have been made by heavy space-boots. It came, and then it stopped. It came again, and stopped once more. As if skulking forms paused to find their way.

Out where the ancient and ghostly buildings were, he saw a star wink out briefly, as if a shape blocked the path of its light. Then it burned peacefully again. John Endlich's hackles rose. His fists tightened on both his rifle and pistol.

He fixed his gaze on the great box, looming blackly, the box that contained the means of survival for his family and

himself, as if he foresaw the future, a moment away. For suddenly, huge as it was, the box rocked, and began to move off, as if it had sprouted legs and come alive.

JOHNNY ENDLICH scrambled to action. He slammed and sealed the face-windows of the helmets of the members of his family, to protect them from suffocation. He did the same for himself, and then unzipped the tent-flap. He darted out with the outrushing air.

This was a moment with murder poised in every tattered fragment of it. John Endlich knew. Murder was engrained in his own taut-drawn nerves, that raged to destroy the trespassers whose pranks had passed the level of practical humor, and become, by the tampering with vital necessities, an attack on life itself. But there was a more immediate menace in these space-twisted roughnecks . . . Strike back at them, even in self-defense, and have it proven!

He had not the faintest doubt who they were—even though he could not see their faces in the blackness. Maybe he should lay low—let them have their way . . . But how could he—even apart from his raging temper, and his honor as a man—when they were making off with his family's and his own means of survival?

He had to throw Rose and the kids into the balance—risking them to the danger that he knew lay beyond his own possible ignoble demise. He did just that when he raised his pistol, struggling against the awful impulse of the rage in him—lifted it high enough so that the explosive bullets that spewed from it would be sure to pass over the heads of the dark silhouettes that were moving about.

"Damn you, Neely!" Endlich yelled into his helmet mike, his finger tightening on the trigger. "Drop that stuff!"

At that moment the sun's rim appeared at the landscape's jagged edge, and on this side of airless Vesta complete night was transformed to complete day, as abruptly as if a switch had been turned.

Alf Neely and John Endlich blinked at each other. Maybe Neely was embarrassed a little by his sudden exposure; but if he

was, it didn't show. Probably the bully in him was scared; but this he covered in a common manner—with a studiedly easy swagger, and a bravado that was not good sense, but bordered on childish recklessness. Yet he had a trump card—by the aggressive glint in his eyes, and his unpleasant grin, Endlich knew that Neely knew that he was afraid for his wife, and wouldn't start anything unless driven and goaded sheerly wild. Even now, they were seven to his one.

"Why, good morning, Neighbor Pun'-kin-head!" Neely crooned, his voice a burlesque of sweetness. "Glad to oblige!"

He hurled the great box down. As he did so, something glinted in his gloved paw. He flicked it expertly into the open side of the wooden case which contained so many things that were vital to the Endlichs—

It was only a tiny nuclear priming-cap, and the blast was feeble. Even so, the box burst apart. Splintered crates, sealed cans, great torn bundles and what not, went skittering far across the plain in every direction, or were hurled high toward the stars, to begin falling at last with the laziness of a descending feather.

NEELY and his companions hadn't attempted to move out of the way of the explosion. They only rolled with its force, protected by their space suits. Endlich rolled, too, helplessly, clutching his pistol and rifle; still, by some superhuman effort, he managed to regain his feet before the far more practiced Neely, who was hampered, no doubt, by a few too many drinks, had even stopped rolling. But when Neely got up, he had drawn his blaster, a useful tool of his trade, but a hellish weapon, too, at short range.

Still, Endlich retained the drop on him. Alf Neely chuckled. "Fourth of July! Hallowe'en, Dutch," he said sweetly. "What's the matter? Don't you think it's fun? Honest to gosh—you just ain't neighborly!"

Then he switched his tone. It became a soft snarl that didn't alter his insolent and confident smirk—and a challenge. He laughed derisively, almost softly. "I dare

you to try to shoot straight, pal," he said. "Even you got more sense than that."

And John Endlich was spang against his terrible, blank wall again. Seven to one. Suppose he got three. There'd be four left—and more in the camp. But the four would survive him. Space crazy lugs. Anyway half drunk. Ready to hoot at the stars, even, if they found no better diversion. Ready to push even any of their own bunch around who seemed weaker than they. For spite, maybe. Or just for the lid-blowing hell of it—as a reaction against the awful confinement of being out here.

"I was gonna smear you all over the place, Greenhorn," Neely rumbled. "But maybe this way is more fun, huh? Maybe we'll be back tonight. But don't wait up for us. Our best regards to your sweet—family."

John Endlich's blazing and just rage was strangled by that same crawling dread as before, as he saw them arc upward and away, propelled by the miniature drive-jets attached to the belts of their space-suits. Their return to camp, hundreds of miles distant, could be accomplished in a couple of minutes.

Rose and the kids were crouched in the deflated tent. But returning there, John Endlich hardly saw them. He hardly heard their frightened questions.

To the trouble with Neely, he could see no end—just one destructive visitation following another. Maybe, already, mortal damage had been done. But Endlich couldn't lie down and quit, any more than a snake, tossed into a fire, could stop trying to crawl out of it, as long as life lasted. Whether doing so made sense or not, didn't matter. In Endlich was the savage energy of despair. He was fighting not just Neely and his crowd, but that other enemy—which was perhaps Neely's main trouble, too. Yeah—the stillness, the nostalgia, the harshness.

"No—don't want any breakfast," he replied sharply to Rose's last question. "Gotta work . . ."

HE WAS LIKE an ant-swarm, rebuilding a trampled nest—oblivious to the certainty of its being trampled again. First he scrambled and leaped around, col-

lecting his scattered and damaged gear. He found that his main atomic battery—so necessary to all that he had to do—was damaged and unworkable. And he had no hope that he could repair it. But this didn't stop his feverish activity.

Now he started unrolling great bolts of a transparent, wire-strengthened plastic. Patching with an adhesive where explosion-rents had to be repaired, he cut hundred-yard strips, and, with Rose's help, laid them edge to edge and fastened them together to make a continuous sheet. Next, all around its perimeter, he dug a shallow trench. The edges of the plastic were then attached to massive metal rails, which he buried in the trench.

"Sealed to the ground along all the sides, Honey," he growled to Rose. "Next we fit in the airlock cabinet, at one corner. Then we've got to see if we can get up enough air to inflate the whole business. That's the tough part—the way things are . . ."

By then the sun was already high. And Endlich was panting raggedly—mostly from worry. After the massive airlock was in place, they attached their electrolysis apparatus to the small atomic battery, which had been used to run the well-driller. The well was in the area covered by the sheet of plastic, which was now propped up here and there with long pieces of board from the great box. Over their heads, the tough, clear material sagged like a tent-roof which has not yet been run up all the way on its poles.

Sluggishly the electrolysis apparatus broke down the water, discharging the hydrogen as waste through a pipe, out over the airless surface of Vesta—but freeing the oxygen under the plastic roof. Yet from the start it was obvious that, with insufficient electric power, the process was too slow.

"And we need to use heat-coils to thaw the ground, Johnny," Rose said. "And to keep the place warm. And to bring nitrogen gas up out of the soil. The few cylinders of the compressed stuff that we've got won't be enough to make a start. And the carbon dioxide . . ."

So John Endlich had to try to repair that main battery. He thought, after a

while, that he might succeed—in time. But then Rose opened the airlock, and the kids came in to bother him. With all the triumph of a favorite puppy dragging an over-ripe bone into the house, Bubs bore a crooked piece of a black substance, hard as wood and more gruesome than a dried and moldy monkey-pelt.

"A tentacle!" Evelyn shrielled. "We were up to those old buildings! We found the people! What's left of them! And lots of stuff. We saw one of their cars! And there was lots more. Dad—you gotta come and see! . . ."

Harassed as he was, John Endlich yielded—because he had a hunch, an idea of a possibility. So he went with his children. He passed through a garden, where a pool had been, and where the blackened remains of plants still projected from beds of dried soil set in odd stone-work. He passed into chambers far too low for comfortable human habitation. And what did he know of the uses of most of what he saw there? The niches in the stone walls? The slanting, ramplike object of blackened wood, beside which three weird corpses lay? The glazed plaque on the wall, which could have been a religious emblem, a calendar of some kind, a decoration, or something beyond human imagining? Yeah—leave such stuff for Cousin Ernest, the school teacher—if he ever got here.

In the cylindrical stone shed nearby, John Endlich had a look at the car—low slung, three-wheeled, a tiller, no seats. Just a flat platform. All he could figure out about the motor was that steam seemed the link between atomic energy and mechanical motion.

Beyond the car was what might be a small tractor. And a lot of odd tools. But the thing which interested him most was the pattern of copper ribbons, insulated with a heavy glaze, similar to that which he had seen traversing walls and ceiling in the first building he had entered. Here, as before, they connected with queer apparatus which might be stoves and non-rotary motors, for all he knew. And also with the globes overhead.

The suggestiveness of all this was plain. And now, at the far end of that cylindrical shed, John Endlich found the square, black-

enamelled case, where all of those copper ribbons came together.

IT WAS SEALED, and apparently self-contained. Nothing could have damaged it very much, in the frigid stillness of millions of years. It secrets were hidden within it. But they could not be too unfamiliar. And its presence was logical. A small, compact power unit. Nervously, he turned a little wheel. A faint vibration was transmitted to his gloved hand. And the globe in the ceiling began to glow.

He shut the thing off again. But how long did it take him to run back to his sagging creation of clear plastic, while the kids howled gleefully around him, and return with the end of a long cable, and pliers? How long did it take him to disconnect all of the glazed copper ribbons, and substitute the wires of the cable—attaching them to queer terminal-posts? No—not long.

The power was not as great as that which his own large atomic battery would have supplied. But it proved sufficient. And the current was direct—as it was supposed to be. The electrolysis apparatus bubbled vigorously. Slowly the tentlike roof began to rise, under the beginnings of a tiny gas-pressure.

"That does it, Pops!" Bubs shrilled.

"Yeah—maybe so," John Endlich agreed almost optimistically. He felt really tender toward his kids, just then. They'd really helped him, for once.

Yes—almost he was hopeful. Until he glanced at the rapidly declining sun. An all-night vigil. No. Probably worse. Oh Lord—how long could he last like this? Even if he managed to keep Neely and Company at bay? Night after night . . . All that he had accomplished seemed useless. He just had so much more that could be wrecked—pushed over with a harsh laugh, as if it really was something funny.

John Endlich's flesh crawled. And in his thinking, now, he went a little against his own determinations. Probably because, in the present state of his disgust, he needed a drink—bad.

"Nuts!" he growled lugubriously. "If I'd only been a little more sociable . . .

That was where the trouble started. I might have got broke, but I would've made friends. They think I'm snooty."

Rose's jaw hardened, as if she took his regrets as an accusation that she had led him along the straight and narrow path, which—by an exasperating shift in philosophical principle—now seemed the shortest route to destruction. But he felt very sorry for her, too; and he didn't believe that what he had just said was entirely the truth.

So he added: "I don't mean it, Honey. I'm just griping."

She softened. "You've got to eat, Johnny," she said. "You haven't eaten all day. And tonight you've got to sleep. I'll keep watch. Maybe it'll be all right . . ."

Well, anyway it was nice to know that his wife was like that. Yeah—gentle, and fairminded. After they had all eaten supper, he tried hard to keep awake. Fear helped him to do so more than ever. Their tent was now covered by the rising plastic roof—but beyond the clear substance, he could still watch for starlight to be stopped by prowling forms, out there at the jagged rim of Vesta. It was hell to feel your skin puckering, and yet to have exhaustion pushing your eyelids down inexorably . . .

Somewhere he lost the hold on himself. And he dreamed that Alf Neely and he were fighting with their fists. And he was being beaten to a pulp. But he was wishing desperately that he could win. Then they could have a drink, and maybe be friends. But he knew hopelessly that things weren't quite that simple, either.

HE AWOKÉ to blink at blazing sunshine. Then his whole body became clammy with perspiration, as he thought of his lapse from responsibility; glancing over, he saw that Rose was sleeping as soundly as the kids. His wide eyes searched for the disaster that he knew he'd find . . .

But the wide roof was all the way up, now—intact. It made a great, squarish bubble, the skin of which was specially treated to stop the hard and dangerous part of the ultra-violet-rays of the sun, and also the lethal portion of the cosmic rays. It even had an inter-skin layer of gum that could seal the punctures that

grain-of-sand-sized meteors might make. But meteors, though plentiful in the asteroid belt, were curiously innocuous. They all moved in much the same direction as the large asteroids, and at much the same velocity—so their relative speed had to be low.

The walls of the small tent around Endlich sagged, where they had bulged tautly before—showing that there was now a firm and equal pressure beyond them. The electrolysis apparatus had been left active all night, and the heating units. This was the result.

John Endlich was at first almost unbelieving when he saw that nothing had been wrecked during the night. For a moment he was elated. He woke up his family by shouting: "Look! The bums stayed away! They didn't come! Look! We've got five acres of ground, covered by air that we can breathe!"

His sense of triumph, however, was soon dampened. Yes—he'd been left unmolested—for one night. But had that been done only to keep him at a fruitless and sleepless watch? Probably. Another delicate form of hazing. And it meant nothing for the night to come—or for those to follow. So he was in the same harrowing position as before, pursued only by a wild and defenseless drive to get things done. To find some slight illusion of security by working to build a sham of normal, Earthly life. To shut out the cold vacuum, and a little of the bluntness of the voidal stars. To make certain reassuring sounds possible around him.

"Got to patch up the pieces of the house, first, and bolt 'em together, Rose," he said feverishly. "Kids—maybe you could help by setting out some of the hydroponic troughs for planting. We gotta break plain ground, too, as soon as it's thawed enough. We gotta . . ." His words raced on with his flying thoughts.

IT WAS a mad day of toil. The hours were pitifully short. They couldn't be stretched to cover more than a fraction of all the work that Endlich wanted to get done. But the low gravity reduced the problem of heavy lifting to almost zero, at least. And he did get the house assembled

—so that Rose and the kids and he could sleep inside its sealed doors. Sealed, that is, if Neely or somebody didn't use a blaster or an explosive cap or bullet—in an orgy of perverted humor . . . He still had no answer for that.

Rose and the children toiled almost as hard as he did. Rose even managed to find a couple of dozen eggs, that—by being carefully packed to withstand a spaceship's takeoff—had withstood the effects of Neely's idea of fun. She set up an incubator, and put them inside, to be hatched.

But, of course, sunset came again—with the same pendent threat as before. Nerve-twisting. Terrible. And a vigil was all but impossible. John Endlich was out on his feet—far more than just dog-tired . . .

"That damned Neely," he groaned, almost too weary even to swallow his food, in spite of the luxury of a real, pullman-style supper table. "He doesn't lose sleep. He can pick his time to come here and raise hob!"

Rose's glance was strange—almost guilty. "Tonight I think he might have to stay home—too," she said.

John Endlich blinked at her.

"All right," she answered, rather defensively. "So to speak, Johnny, I called the cops. Yesterday—with the small radio transmitter. When you and Bubs and Evelyn were up in those old buildings. I reported Neely and his companions."

"Reported them?"

"Sure. To Mr. Mahoney, the boss at the mining camp. I was glad to find out that there is a little law and order around here. Mr. Mahoney was nice. He said that he wouldn't be surprised if they were cooled in the can for a few days, and then confined to the camp area. Matter of fact, I radioed him again last night. It's been done."

John Endlich's vast sigh of relief was slightly tainted by the idea that to call on a policing power for protection was a little bit on the timid side.

"Oh," he grunted. "Thanks. I never thought of doing that."

"Johnny."

"Yeah?"

"I kind of got the notion, though—

from between the lines of what Mr. Mahoney said— that there was heavy trouble brewing at the camp. About conditions, and home-leaves, and increased profit-sharing. Maybe there's danger of riots and what-not, Johnny. Anyhow, Mr. Mahoney said that we should 'keep on exercising all reasonable caution.'"

"Hmm-m—Mr. Mahoney is *very* nice, ain't he?" Endlich growled.

"You stop that, Johnny," Rose ordered.

But her husband had already passed beyond thoughts of jealousy. He was thinking of the time when Neely would have worked out his sentence, and would be free to roam around again—no doubt with increased annoyance at the Endlich clan for causing his restraint. If a riot or something didn't spring him, beforehand. John Endlich itched to try to tear his head off. But, of course, the same consequences as before still applied . . .

AS IT turned out, the Endlichs had a reprieve of two months and fourteen days, almost to the hour and figured on a strictly Earth-time scale.

For what it was worth, they accomplished a great deal. In their great plastic greenhouse, supported like a colossal bubble by the humid, artificially-warmed air inside it, long troughs were filled with pebbles and hydroponic solution. And therein tomatoes were planted, and lettuce, radishes, corn, onions, melons—just about everything in the vegetable line.

There remained plenty of ground left over from the five acres, so John Endlich tinkered with that fifty-million-year-old tractor, figured out its atomic-power-to-steam principle, and used it to help harrow up the ancient soil of a smashed planet. He added commercial fertilizers and nitrates to it—the nitrates were, of course, distinct from the gaseous nitrogen that had been held, spongelike, by the subsoil, and had helped supply the greenhouse with atmosphere. Then he harrowed the ground again. The tractor worked fine, except that the feeble gravity made the lugs of its wheels slip a lot. He repeated his planting, in the old-fashioned manner.

Under ideal conditions, the inside of the great bubble was soon a mass of growing

things. Rose had planted flowers—to be admired, and to help out the hive of bees, which were essential to some of the other plants, as well. Nor was the flora limited to the Earthly. Some seeds or spores had survived, here, from the mother world of the asteroids. They came out of their cons of suspended animation, to become root and tough, spiky stalk, and to mix themselves sparsely with vegetation that had immigrated from Earth, now that livable conditions had been restored over this little piece of ground. But whether they were fruit or weed, it was difficult to say.

Sometimes John Endlich was misled. Sometimes, listening to familiar sounds, and smelling familiar odors, toward the latter part of his reprieve, he almost imagined that he'd accomplished his basic desires here on Vesta—when he had always failed on Earth.

There was the smell of warm soil, flowers, greenery. He heard irrigation water trickling. The sweetcorn rustled in the wind of fans he'd set up to circulate the air. Bees buzzed. Chickens, approaching adolescence, peeped contentedly as they dusted themselves and stretched luxuriously in the shadows of the cornfield.

For John Endlich it was all like the echo of a somnolent summer of his boyhood. There was peace in it: it was like a yearning fulfilled. An end of wanderlust for him, here on Vesta. In contrast to the airless desolation outside, the interior of this five-acre greenhouse was the one most desirable place to be. So, except for the vaguest of stirrings sometimes in his mind, there was not much incentive to seek fun elsewhere. If he ever had time.

And there was a lot of the legendary, too, in what his family and he had accomplished. It was like returning a little of the blue sky and the sounds of life to this land of ruins and roadways and the ghosts of dead beauty. Maybe there'd be a lot more of all that, soon, when the rumored major influx of homesteaders reached Vesta.

"Yes, Johnny," Rose said once. "'Legendary' is a lot nicer word than 'ghostly'. And the ghosts are changing their name to legends."

Rose had to teach the kids their regular

lessons. That children would be taught was part of the agreement you had to sign at the A. H. O. before you could be shipped out with them. But the kids had time for whimsy, too. In make-believe, they took their excursions far back to former ages. They played that they were "Old People."

Endlich, having repaired his atomic battery, didn't draw power anymore from the unit that had supplied the ancient buildings. But the relics remained. From a device like a phonograph, there was even a bell-like voice that chanted when a lever was pressed.

And it was the kids who found the first "tay-tay bug," a day after its trills were heard from among the new foilage. "Ta-a-a-y-y-y—ta-a-a-a-y-y-y—" The sound was like that of a little wheel, humming with the speed of rotation, and then slowing to a scratchy stop.

A one-legged hopper, with a thin but rigid gliding wing of horn. Opalescent in its colors. It had evidently hatched from a tiny egg, preserved by the cold for ages.

Wise enough not to clutch it with his bare hands, Bubs came running with it held in a leaf.

It proved harmless. It was ugly and beautiful. Its great charm was that it was a vocal echo from the far past.

SURE. Life got to be fairly okay, in spite of hard work. The Endlichs had conquered the awful stillness with life-sounds. Growing plants kept the air in their greenhouse fresh and breathable by photosynthesis. John Endlich did a lot of grinning and whistling. His temper never flared once. Deep down in him there was only a brooding certainty that the calm couldn't last. For, from all reports, trouble seethed at the mining camp. At any time there might be a blowup, a reign of terror that would roll over all of Vesta. A thing to release pent-up forces in men who had seen too many hard stars, and had heard too much stillness. They were like the stuff inside a complaining volcano.

The Endlichs had sought to time their various crops, so that they would all be ready for market on as nearly as possible the same day. It was intended as a trick of advertising—a dramatically sudden appear-

ance of much fresh produce.

So, one morning, in a jet-equipped space-suit, Endlich arced out for the mining camp. Inside the suit he carried samples from his garden. Six tomatoes. Beauties.

"Have luck with them, Johnny! But watch out!" Rose flung after him by helmet phone. With a wama laugh. Just for a moment he felt maybe a little silly. Tomatoes! But they were what he was banking on, and had forced toward maturity, most. The way he figured, they were the kind of fruit that the guys in the camp—gagged by a diet of canned and dehydrated stuff, because they were too busy chasing mineral wealth to keep a decent hydroponic garden going—would be hungriest for.

Well—he was rather too right, in some ways, to be fortunate. Yeah—they still call what happened the Tomato War.

Poor Johnny Endlich. He was headed for the commissary dome to display his wares. But vague urges sidetracked him, and he went into the recreation dome of the camp, instead.

And into the bar.

The petty sin of two drinks hardly merits the punishing trouble which came his way as, at least partially, a result. With his face-window open, he stood at the bar with men whom he had never seen before. And he began to have minor delusions of grandeur. He became a little too proud of his accomplishments. His wariness slipped into abeyance. He had a queer idea that, as a farmer with concrete evidence of his skills to show, he would win respect that had been denied him. Dread of consequences of some things that he might do, became blurred. His hot temper began to smolder, under the spark of memory and the fury of insult and malicious tricks, that, considering the safety of his loved ones, he had had no way to fight back against. Frustration is a dangerous force. Released a little, it excited him more. And the tense mood of the camp—a thing in the very air of the domes—stirred him up more. The camp—ready to explode into sudden, open barbarism for days—was now at a point where nothing so dramatic as fresh tomatoes and farmers in a bar was needed to set the fireworks off.

John Endlich had his two drinks. Then,

with calm and foolhardy detachment, he set the six tomatoes out in a row before him on the synthetic mahogany.

HE DIDN'T have to wait at all for results. Bloodshot eyes, some of them belonging to men who had been as gentle as lambs in their ordinary lives on Earth, turned swiftly alert. Bristly faces showed swift changes of expression: surprise, interest, greed for possession—but most of all, aggressive and Satanic humor.

"Jeez—*tamadas!*" somebody growled, amazed.

Under the circumstances, to be aware of opportunity was to act. Big paws, some bare and calloused, some in the gloves of space suits, reached out, grabbed. Teeth bit. Juice squirted, landing on hard metal shaped for the interplanetary regions.

So far, fine. John Endlich felt prouder of himself—he'd expected a certain fierceness and lack of manners. But knowing all he did know, he should have taken time to visualize the inevitable chain-reaction.

"Thanks, pal . . . You're a prince . . ."

Sure—but the thanks were more of a mockery than a formality.

"Hey! None for me? Whatsa idea? . . ."

"Shuddup, Mic . . . Who's dis guy? . . . Say, Friend—you wouldn't be that pun-kin-head we been hearin' about, would you? . . . Well—my gracious—bet you are! Dis'll be nice to watch! . . ."

"Where's Alf Neely, Cranston? What we need is excitement."

"Seen him out by the slot-machines. The bar is still out of bounds for him. He can't come in here."

"Says who? Boss Man Mahoney? For dis much sport Neely can go straight to hell! And take Boss Man with him on a pitchfork . . . Hey-y-y! . . . Ne-e-e-e-l-y-y-y! . . ."

The big man whose name was called lumbered to the window at the entrance to the bar, and peered inside. During the last couple of months he'd been in a perpetual grouch over his deprivation of liberty, which had rankled him more as an affront to his dignity.

When he saw the husband of the authoress of his woes—the little bum, who, being unable to guard his own, had allowed

his woman to holler "Cop!"—Neely let out a yell of sheer glee. His huge shoulders hunched, his pendulous nose wobbled, his squinty eyes gleamed and he charged into the bar.

John Endlich's first reaction was curiously similar to Neely's. He felt a flash of savage triumph under the stimulus of the thought of immediate battle with the cause of most of his troubles. Temper blazed in him.

Belatedly, however, the awareness came into his mind that he had started an emotional avalanche that went far beyond the weight and fury of one man like Neely. Lord, wouldn't he ever learn? It was tough as hell to crawl, but how could a man put his wife and kids in awful jeopardy at the hands of a flock of guys whom space had turned into gorillas?

Endlich tried for peace. It was to his credit that he did so quite coolly. He turned toward his charging adversary and grinned.

"Hi, Neely," he said. "Have a drink—on me."

The big man stopped short, almost in unbelief that anyone could stoop so low as to offer appeasement. Then he laughed uproariously.

"Why, I'd be delighted, Mr. Pun'kins," he said in a poisonous-sweet tone. "Let bygones be bygones. Hey, Charlie! Hear what Pun'kins says? The drinks are all on him! And how is the Little Lady, Mrs. Pun'kins? Lonesome, I bet. Glad to hear it. I'm gonna fix that!"

With a sudden lunge Neely gripped Endlich's hand, and gave it a savage if momentary twist that sent needles of pain shooting up the homesteader's arm. It was a goading invitation to battle, which grim knowledge of the sequel now compelled Endlich to pass up.

"Don't call him Pun'kins, Neely!" somebody yelled. "It ain't polite to mispronounce a name. It's Mr. Tomatoes. I just saw. Bet he's got a million of 'em, out there on the farm!"

THE WHOLE CROWD in the bar broke into coarse shouts and laughs and comments. ". . . We ain't good neighbors—neglecting our social duties. Let's

pay 'em a visit . . . Pun'kins! What else you got besides tamadas? Let's go on a picnic! . . . Hell with the Boss Man! . . . Yah-h-h—We need some diversion . . . I'm not goin' on shift . . . Come on, everybody! There's gonna be a fight—a moider! . . . Hell with the Boss Man . . .”

Like the flicker of flame flashing through dry gunpowder, you could feel the excitement spread. Out of the bar. Out of the rec-dome. It would soon ignite the whole tense camp.

John Endlich's heart was in his mouth, as his mind pictured the part of all this that would affect him and his. A bunch of men gone wild, kicking over the traces, arcing around Vesta, sacking and destroying in sheer exuberance, like brats on Hallowe'en. They would stop at nothing. And Rose and the kids . . .

This was it. What he'd been so scared of all along. It was at least partly his own fault. And there was no way to stop it now.

“I love tomatoes, Mr. Pun'kins,” Neely rumbled at Endlich's side, reaching for the drink that had been set before him. “But first I'm gonna smear you all over the camp . . . Take my time—do a good job . . . Because y'didn't give me any tomatoes . . .”

Whereat, John Endlich took the only slender advantage at hand for him—surprise. With all the strength of his muscular body, backed up by dread and pent-up fury, he sent a gloved fist crashing straight into Neely's open face-window. Even the pang in his well-protected knuckles was a satisfaction—for he knew that the damage to Neely's ugly features must be many times greater.

The blow, occurring under the conditions of Vesta's tiny gravity, had an entirely un-Earthly effect. Neely, eyes glazing, floated gently up and away. And Endlich, since he had at the last instant clutched Neely's arm, was drawn along with the miner in a graceful, arcing flight through the smoky air of the bar. Both armored bodies, lacking nothing in inertia, tore through the tough plastic window, and they bounced lightly on the pavement of the main section of the rec-dome.

Neely was as limp as a wet rag, sleep-

ing peacefully, blood all over his crushed face. But that he was out of action signified no peace, when so many of his buddies were nearby, and beginning to seethe, like a swarm of hornets.

So there was an element of despair in Endlich's quick actions as he slammed Neely's face-window and his own shut, picked up his enemy, and used his jets to propel him in the long leap to the airlock of the dome. He had no real plan. He just had the ragged and all but hopeless thought of using Neely as a hostage—as a weapon in the bitter and desperate attempt to defend his wife and children from the mob that would be following close behind him . . .

Tumbling end over end with his light but bulky burden, he sprawled at the threshold of the airlock, where the guard, posted there, had stepped hastily out of his way. Again, capricious luck, surprise, and swift action were on his side. He pressed the control-button of the lock, and squirmed through its double valves before the startled guard could stop him.

Then he slammed his jets wide, and aimed for the horizon.

IT WAS a wild journey—for, to fly straight in a frictionless vacuum, any missile must be very well balanced; and the inertia and the slight but unwieldy weight of Neely's bulk disturbed such balance in his own jet-equipped space suit. The journey was made, then, not in a smooth arc, but in a series of erratic waverings. But what Endlich lacked in precise direction, he made up in sheer reckless, dread-driven speed.

From the very start of that wild flight, he heard voices in his helmet phones:

“Damn pun'kin-head greenhorn! Did you see how he hit Neely, Schmidt? Yeah—by surprise . . . Yeah—Kuzak. I saw. He hit without warning . . . Damn yella yokel . . . Who's comin' along to get him? . . .”

Sure—there was another side to it—other voices:

“Shucks—Neely had it coming to him. I hope the farmer really murders that big lunkhead . . . You ain't kiddin', Muir. I was glad to see his face splatter like a

rotten tamata . . ."

Okay—fine. It was good to know you had some sensible guys on your side. But what good was it, when the camp as a whole was boiling over from its internal troubles? There were more than enough roughnecks to do a mighty messy job—fast.

Panting with tension, Endlich swooped down before his greenhouse, and dragged Neely inside through the airlock. For a fleeting instant the sights and sounds and smells that impinged on his senses, as he opened his face-window once more, brought him a regret. The rustle of corn, the odor of greenery, the chicken voices—there was home in all of this. Something pastoral and beautiful and orderly—gained with hard work. And something brought back—restored—from the remote past. The buzzing of the tay-tay bug was even a real echo from that smashed yet undoubtedly once beautiful world of antiquity.

But these were fragile concerns, beside the desperate question of the immediate safety of Rose and the kids . . . Already cries and shouts and comments were coming faintly through his helmet phones again:

"Get the yokel! Get the bum! . . . We'll fix his wagon good . . ."

The pack was on the way—getting closer with every heartbeat. Never in his life had Endlich experienced so harrowing a time as this; never, if by some miracle he lived, could he expect another equal to it.

To stand and fight, as he would have done if he were alone, would mean simply that he would be cut down. To try the peacemaking of appeasement, would have probably the same result—plus, for himself, the dishonor of contempt.

So, where was there to turn, with grim, unanswering blankness on every side?

JOHN ENDLICH felt mightily an old yearning—that of a fundamentally peaceful man for a way to oppose and win against brutal, overpowering odds without using either serious violence or the even more futile course of supine submission. Here on Vesta, this had been the issue he had faced all along. In many ages and many nations—and probably on many

planets throughout the universe—others had faced it before him.

To his straining and tortured mind the trite and somewhat mocking answers came: Psychology. Salesmanship. The selling of respect for one's self.

Ah, yes. These were fine words. Glib words. But the question, "How?" was more bitter and derisive than ever.

Still, he had to try something—to make at least a forlorn effort. And now, from certain beliefs that he had, coupled with some vague observations that he had made during the last hour, a tattered suggestion of what form that effort might take, came to him.

As for his personal defects that had given him trouble in the past—well—he was lugubriously sure that he had learned a final lesson about liquor. For him it always meant trouble. As for wanderlust, and the gambling and hell-raising urge—he had been willing to stay put on Vesta, named for the goddess of home, for weeks, now. And he was now about to make his last great gamble. If he lost, he wouldn't be alive to gamble again. If, by great good-fortune, he won—well he was certain that all the charm of unnecessary chance-taking would, by the memory of these awful moments, be forever poisoned in him.

Now Rose and the youngsters came hurrying toward him.

"Back so soon, Johnny?" Rose called. "What's this? What happened?"

"Who's the guy, Pop?" Evelyn asked. "Oh—Baloney Nose . . . What are you doing with him?"

But by then they all had guessed some of the tense mood, and its probable meaning.

"Neely's pals are coming, Honey," Endlich said quietly. "It's the showdown. Hide the kids. And yourself. Quick. Under the house, maybe."

Rose's pale eyes met his. They were comprehending, they were worried, but they were cool. He could see that she didn't want to leave him.

Evelyn looked as though she might begin to whimper; but her small jaw hardened.

Bubs' lower lip trembled. But he said valiantly: "I'll get the guns, Pop, I'm

stayin' with yuh."

"No you're not, son," John Endlich answered. "Get going. Orders. Get the guns to keep with you—to watch out for Mom and Sis."

Rose took the kids away with her, without a word. Endlich wondered how to describe what was maybe her last look at him. There were no fancy words in his mind. Just Love. And deep concern.

Alf Neely was showing signs of returning consciousness. Which was good. Still dragging him, Endlich went and got a bushel basket. It was filled to the brim with ripe, red tomatoes, but he could carry its tiny weight on the palm of one hand, scarcely noticing that it was there.

For an instant Endlich scanned the sky, through the clear plastic roof of the great bubble. He saw at least a score of shapes in space armor, arcing nearer—specks in human form, glowing with reflected sunlight, like little hurtling moons among the stars. Neely's pals. In a moment they would arrive.

ENDLICH took Neely and the loaded basket close to the transparent side of the greenhouse, nearest the approaching roughnecks. There he removed Neely's oxygen helmet, hoping that, maybe, this might deter his friends a little from rupturing the plastic of the huge bubble and letting the air out. It was a feeble safeguard, for, in all probability, in case of such rupture, Neely would be rescued from death by smothering and cold and the boiling of his blood, simply by having his helmet slammed back on again.

Next, Endlich dumped the contents of the basket on the ground, inverted it, and sat Neely upon it. The big man had recovered consciousness enough to be merely groggy by now. Endlich slapped his battered face vigorously, to help clear his head—after having, of course, relieved him of the blaster at his belt.

Endlich left his own face-window open, so that the sounds of Neely's voice could penetrate to the mike of his own helmet phone, thus to be transmitted to the helmet phones of Neely's buddies.

Endlich was anything but calm inside, with the wild horde, as irresponsible in

their present state of mind as a pack of idiot baboons, bearing down on him. But he forced his tone to be conversational when he spoke.

"Hello, Neely," he said. "You mentioned you liked tomatoes. Maybe you were kidding. Anyhow I brought you along home with me, so you could have some. Here on the ground, right in front of you, is a whole bushel. The regular asteroids price—considering the trouble it takes to grow 'em, and the amount of dough a guy like you can make for himself out here, is five bucks apiece. But for you, right now, they're all free. Here, have a nice fresh, ripe one, Neely."

The big man glared at his captor for a second, after he had looked dazedly around. He would have leaped to his feet—except that the muzzle of his own blaster was leveled at the center of his chest, at a range of not over twenty inches. For a fleeting instant, Neely looked scared and prudent. Then he saw his pals, landing like a flock of birds, just beyond the transparent side of the greenhouse. And he heard their shouts, coming loudly from Endlich's helmet-phones:

"We come after you, Neely! We'll get the damn yokel off your neck . . . Come on, guys—let's turn the damn place upside down! . . ."

Neely grew courageous—yes, maybe it did take a certain animal nerve to do what he did. His battered and bloodied lip curled.

"Whatdayuh think you're up to, Punkin-head!" he snarled slowly, his tone dripping contempt for the insanely foolish. He laughed sourly, "Haw-haw-haw." Then his face twisted into a confident and mocking leer. To carry the mockery farther, a big paw reached out and grabbed the proffered tomato from Endlich's hand. "Sure—thanks. Anything to oblige!" He took a great bite from the the fruit, clowning the action with a forced expression of relish. "Ummm!" he grunted. In danger, he was being the showman, playing for the approval of his pals. He was proving his comic coolness—that even now he was master of the situation, and was in no hurry to be rescued. "Come on, punk!" he ordered Endlich. "Where

is the next one, seeing you're so generous? Be polite to your guest!"

Endlich handed him a second tomato. But as he did so, it seemed all the things he dreaded would happen were breathing down his back. For the faces that he glimpsed beyond the plastic showed the twisted expressions that betray the point where savage humor imperceptibly becomes murderous. A dozen blasters were leveled at him.

But the eyes of the men outside showed, too, the kind of interest that any odd procedure can command. They stood still for a moment, watching, commenting:

"Hey—Neely! See if you can down the next one with one bite! . . . Don't eat 'em all, Neely! Save some for us! . . ."

Endlich was following no complete plan. He had only the feeling that somewhere here there might be a dramatic touch that, by a long chance, would yield him a toe-hold on the situation. Without a word, he gave Neely a third tomato. Then a fourth and a fifth . . .

Neely kept gobbling and clowning.

Yeah—but can this sort of horseplay go on until one man has consumed an entire bushel of tomatoes? The question began to shine speculatively in the faces of the onlookers. It began to appeal to their wolfish sense of comedy. And it started to betray itself—in another manner—in Neely's face.

AFTER the fifteenth tomato, he burped and balked. "That's enough kiddin' around, Pun'kin-head," he growled. "Get away with your damned garden truck! I should be beatin' you to a grease-spot right this minute! Why—I—"

Then Neely tried to lunge for the blaster. As Endlich squeezed the trigger, he turned the weapon aside a trifle, so that the beam of energy flicked past Neely's ear and splashed garden soil that turned incandescent, instantly.

John Endlich might have died in that moment, cut down from behind. That he wasn't probably meant that, from the position of complete underdog among the spectators, his popularity had risen some.

"Neely," he said with a grin, "how can you start beatin', when you ain't done

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eatin'? Neely—here I am, trying to be friendly and hospitable, and you aren't co-operating. A whole bushel of juicy tomatoes—symbols of civilization way the hell out here in the asteroids—and you haven't even made a dent in 'em yet! What's the matter, Neely? Lose your appetite? Here! Eat! . . ."

Endlich's tone was falsely persuasive. For there was a steely note of command in it. And the blaster in Endlich's hand was pointed straight at Neely's chest.

Neely's eyes began to look frightened and sullen. He shifted uncomfortably, and the bushel basket creaked under his weight. "You're yella as any damn pun-kin!" he said loudly. "You don't fight fair! . . . Guys—what's the matter with you? Get this nut with the blaster offa me! . . ."

"Hmm—yella," Endlich seemed to muse. "Maybe not as yella as you were once—coming around here at night with a whole gang, not so long ago—"

"Call me yella?" Nelly hollered. "Why, you lousy damn yokel, if you didn't have that blaster—"

Endlich said grimly, "But I got it, friend!" He sent a stream of energy from the blaster right past Neely's head, so close that a shock of the other's hair smoked and curled into black wisps. "And watch your language—my wife and kids can hear you—"

Neely's thick shoulders hunched. He ducked nervously, rubbing his head—and for the first time there was a hint of genuine alarm in his voice. "All right," he growled, "all right! Take it easy—"

Something deep within John Endlich relaxed—a cold tight knot seemed to unwind—for, at that moment, he knew that Neely was beginning to lose. The big man's evident discomfort and fear were the marks of weakness—to his followers at least; and with them, he could never be a leader, again. Moreover, he had allowed himself to be maneuvered into the position of being the butt of a practical joke, that, by his own code, must be followed up, to its nasty, if interesting, outcome. The spectators began to resemble Romans at the circus, with Neely the victim. And the victim's downfall was tragically swift.

"Come on, Neely! You heard what Pun'kins said," somebody yelled. "Jeez—a whole bushel. Let's see how many you can eat, Neely. . . . Damned if this ain't gonna be rich! Don't let us down, Neely! Nobody's hurtin' yuh. All you have to do is eat—all them nice tamadas . . . Hey, Neely—if that bushel ain't enough for you, I'll personally buy you another, at the reg'lar price. Haw-haw-haw . . . Lucky Neely! Look at him! Having a swell banquet. Better than if he was home . . . Haw-haw-haw . . . Come on, Pun'kins—make him eat! . . ."

Yeah, under certain conditions human nature can be pretty fickle. Wonderingly, John Endlich felt himself to be respected—the Top Man. The guy who had shown courage and ingenuity, and was winning, by the harsh code of men who had been roughened and soured by space—by life among the asteroids.

FOR a little while then, he had to be hard. He thrust another tomato toward Neely, at the same time directing a thin stream from the blaster just past the big nose. Neely ate six more tomatoes with a will, his eyes popping, sweat streaming down his forehead.

Endlich's next blaster-stream barely missed Neely's booted toe. The persuasive shot was worth fifty-five more dollars in garden fruit consumed. The crowd gave with mock cheers and bravos, and demanded more action.

"That makes thirty-two . . . Come on, Neely—that's just a good start. You got a long, long ways to go . . . Come on, Pun'kins—bet you can stuff fifty into him . . ."

To goad Neely on in this ludicrous and savage game, Endlich next just scorched the metal at Neely's shoulder. It isn't to be said that Endlich didn't enjoy his revenge—for all the anguish and real danger that Neely had caused him. But as this fierce yet childish sport went on, and the going turned really rough for the big asteroid miner, Endlich's anger began to be mixed with self-disgust. He'd always be a hot-tempered guy; he couldn't help that. But now, satisfaction, and a hopeful glimpse of peace ahead, burned the

fury out of him and touched him with shame. Still, for a little more, he had to go on. Again and again, as before, he used that blaster. But, as he did so, he talked, ramblingly, knowing that the audience, too, would hear what he said. Maybe, in a way, it was a lecture; but he couldn't help that:

"Have another tomato, Neely. Sorry to do things like this—but it's your own way. So why should you complain? Funny, ain't it? A man can get even too many tomatoes. Civilized tomatoes. Part of something most guys around here have been homesick for, for a long time . . . Maybe that's what has been most of the trouble out here in the asteroids. Not enough civilization. On Earth we were used to certain standards—in spite of being rough enough there, too. Here, the traces got kicked over. But on this side of Vesta, an idea begins to soak in: This used to be nice country—blue sky, trees growing. Some of that is coming back, Neely. And order with it. Because, deep in our guts, that's what we all want. And fresh vegetables'll help . . . Have another tomato, Neely. Or should we call it enough, guys?"

"Neely, you ain't gonna quit now?" somebody guffawed. "You're doin' almost good. Haw-haw!"

Neely's face was purple. His eyes were bloodshot. His mouth hung partly open. "Gawd—no—please!" he croaked.

An embarrassed hush fell over the crowd. Back home on Earth, they had all been more-or-less average men. Finally someone said, expressing the intrusion among them of the better dignity of man:

"Aw—let the poor dope go . . ."

Then and there, John Endlich sold what was left of his first bushel of tomatoes. One of his customers—the once loud-mouthed Schmidt—even said, rather stiffly, "Pun'kins—you're all right."

And these guys were the real rough-necks of the mining camp.

Is it necessary to mention that, as they were leaving, Neely lost his pride completely, soiling the inside of his helmet's

facewindow so that he could scarcely see out of it? That, amid the raucous laughter of his companions, which still sounded slightly self-conscious and pitying. Thus Alf Neely sank at last to the level of help-less oblivion and nonentity.

A WEEK of Vestal days later, in the afternoon, Rose and the kids came to John Endlich, who was toiling over his cucumbers.

"Their name is Harper, Pop!" Bubs shouted.

"And they've got three children!" Evelyn added.

John Endlich, straightened, shaking a kink out of his tired back. "Who?" he questioned.

"The people who are going to be our new neighbors, Johnny," Rose said happily. "We just picked up the news on the radio—from their ship, which is approaching from space right now! I hope they're nice folks. And, Johnny—there used to be country schools with no more than five pupils . . ."

"Sure," John Endlich said.

Something felt warm around his heart. Leave it to a woman to think of a school—the symbol of civilization, marching now across the void. John Endlich thought of the trouble at the mining camp, which his first load of fresh vegetables, picked up by a small space boat, had perhaps helped to end. He thought of the relics in this strange land. Things that were like legends of a lost pastoral beauty. Things that could come back. The second family of homesteaders was almost here. Endlich was reconciled to domesticity. He felt at home; he felt proud.

Bees buzzed near him. A tay-tay bug from a perished era, hummed and scraped out a mournful sound.

"I wonder if the Harper kids'll call you Mr. Pun'kins, Pop," Bubs remarked. "Like the miners still do."

John Endlich laughed. But somehow he was prouder than ever. Maybe the name would be a legend, too.

The

DIVERSIFAL

Entoré, a creature not yet born, and Bryan Barret, rebel, radical, diversifal — together they worked to prevent a world of probability that would destroy the human race!

“NO,” said the shadowy man who sat high above the floor on the chair of the time-machine, “you can’t do that.”

“Can’t, eh?”

“No!”

“Sorry.”

For a second, Bryan was shaken with indecision. *This is intolerable*, he thought. *I’ll turn the doorknob. After all, he has no real jurisdiction over my actions. Nor has he, in spite of the stakes involved, any right to meddle in my life the way he has.*

His rebel thoughts endured for only that second. His grip loosened on the doorknob, his gloved hand fell away. He actually took a few steps backward, as if he would negate that action which led toward disaster. Then he turned quickly, urged his undernourished body back up the threadbare hall, into his equally threadbare room. Off came his shapeless hat, and overcoat which was ripped at seams and pockets, and he sat down, brain numb, the sensations of his stomach forgotten in the greater hunger.

Where is she? *Who is she?*

He did not have the courage to meet the cold eyes of the man who sat in shadowy outline amongst nebulous, self-suspended machinery, although that being watched him with merciless inflexibility of purpose. He had only the courage to speak, while his eyes fixed dully on the

gingerbreaded metal bed with its sagging mattress.

“The Alpha Group?”

“The Alpha Group,” the shadowy man spoke coldly, in agreement, “*Punctus* four. You would have met *her*.”

“I thought so. I felt it.”

“You felt nothing of the sort. You have an exaggerated notion of the perceptive qualities of your psyche.”

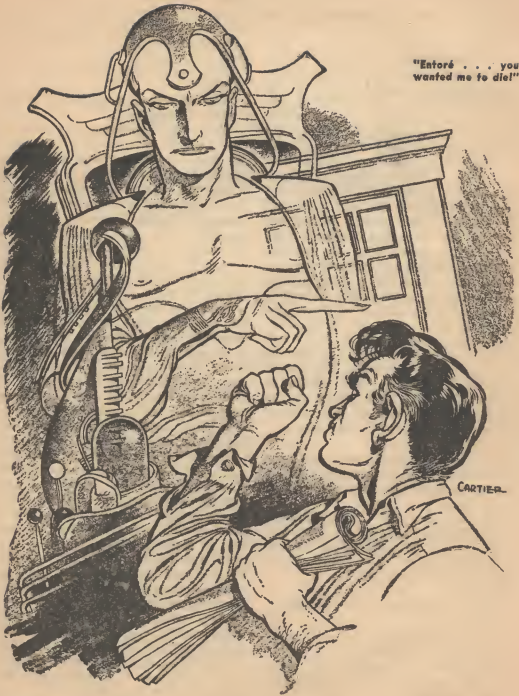
“I named the Alpha Group,” said Bryan wearily.

“Because for the first three or four years of our association, the Alpha Group will predominate. And because you have come to associate certain of my facial expressions and tonal qualities with the group. There was no telepathic pick-up from the girl. She is not aware that you exist. Nor will she ever be aware, as long as you choose to work in close collaboration with me—and as a humanitarian yourself, you will not refuse to collaborate.”

Bryan leaned back in the worn armchair, grinning twistedly, though his heart was lead in his breast. He held the long-lashed eyes of the god-like creature with a flickering sidewise glance. “Perhaps you will choose to stop collaborating with me.”

The nostrils of the being flared. “No. Never. We will continue—we must continue to work together until the Alpha, Delta, and Gamma groups are exhausted—

"Entoré . . . you
wanted me to die!"



A Short Story by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

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or until—"

"Or until I commit suicide as you suggested."

"Yes."

Bryan lost his tensivity, and his fear that he could not bear it, might disobey a command from this creature. Suddenly, he was amused. Bryan was chained to this creature, but no less than this creature was chained to him; chained to him for ten long years, or until he might take his own life.

Creature? Yes. For certainly any animal that is not homo sapiens is a creature. Even if he be homo superior, of the year Eight-hundred thousand A.D., and has invented a time-machine, and has but one powerful, compelling thought in mind—to save the human race. Or that race of creatures which had stemmed from the human race. That was it. After fighting and imagining, aspiring and succeeding, for a good many millions of years, man was about to be snuffed out. So the shadowy being—homo superior—had told Bryan on that day a week ago when he had appeared in this room. The human race, far in the future, would destroy itself unless—unless Bryan Barret did not do something that he had done; did not become something that he had become.

THE thoughts of the creature had impinged on his brain clearly after the first moments of fright. Bryan had listened, and believed.

"So I'm a diversifal," he had muttered. "Bryan Barret, liberal, radical, diversifal."

"You are a diversifal. I can coin no other word to fit."

"And *she* is a diversifal."

"Yes."

"And our child would be a mutant."

"Yes."

"I thought," Bryan had said, his thoughts sinking heavily into a morass of intangibles, "I thought, if one wants to follow the theory to its logical conclusion, that there are an infinite number of probable worlds."

"Are there?" The depthless eyes of the being, looking down at Bryan from his shadowy height above the floor, had been contemptuous with disinterest. "I know of only two. They are the only two with

which I am concerned. A thousand years in my future they warred—and humanity destroyed itself. This I know. This I must prevent. From your unborn mutant child my race stems."

"Your race?" Bryan had exclaimed.

"Yes."

"You are seeking to prevent your own world of probability?"

"Yes." The long-lashed eyes flickered. The being leaned forward a little, staring down at Bryan. "Why not, Bryan Barret? Does it matter? It is my world of probability which discovered the manner of traveling to the other world. It is my world which waged the war. It is my world, your world, which is—will be—at fault. I am selfless. You know what it is to be selfless. You can understand. And, after all, you are the diversifal—the splitting factor."

Bryan was inwardly shaken. The selfless superman. Or, and this was more likely, the selfless scientist. The picture, in its entirety, had come quite clearly to Bryan Barret. He was a diversifal, because in him impinged events any of which might lead to the creation of a certain time-branch; a time-branch which must not be created if humanity in a far-distant era were to survive. The concept of worlds of *if* was not new to Bryan, nor was the idea of the future of man outside his thoughts. He dealt with the future, with the liberation of man from his bondage to tyranny. He was fighting for a future wherein man would know no poverty, no social backwardness; for a time when man could come into his own, blossom forth and make true use of the boundless resources that were possible. Small wonder, then, that he could accept the idea of a man from the far future without trouble, and could decide to give ten years of his life to the cause for which this man from the future was fighting.

But already the first week of that ten years had become a nightmare.

"You've kept me here," he now told the being, "three days, without any food except some stale cakes. Why?"

"Because the events of the Alpha Group are worked around your every probable action like a net. If you left this house

before morning, you would meet her." His sharp-pointed face turned hard. "The psychological data I have on her is sketchy. I can control your actions. I cannot control hers, nor guess what they would be. And also, had you left here at any time during the last three days, you would have made an acquaintance whom you would not see again for eight, perhaps nine years."

"The Gamma Group!"

"The Gamma Group. That acquaintance would show up as a probable event in the Gamma Group which would lead to tickets to a musical comedy in a New York—" He stopped speaking, but Bryan Barret, without knowing it, was watching him with cunning expression. The man from the future sneered. "Your obvious, unconscious desire to trick me wouldicken even you, Bryan. Every word I speak is to your unconscious merely a clue to her identity. You must fight that."

SWEAT started on Bryan's square, thinning face. He bowed forward, feeling as if he were about to burst. "I can leave here tomorrow morning?" His voice was muffled.

"Yes. And your way of life must change. You will go to Hannicut, editor of *The Daily News-Star*, and tell him you'd like to take that job he offered you last year."

Bryan came to his feet in a blaze of anger. "No! You know why I didn't take that job!"

"I know why. But it is still necessary for you to lose your integrity if we are to succeed. Go to Hannicut and tell him you're willing to falsify the news either by commission or omission. Also you will cancel your membership in the so-called radical organization, *Freedom For All*. And in any other liberal organization you may belong to."

He looked calmly down into Bryan's stricken, agonized face. "I know what those associations mean to you — and to freedom-loving men everywhere. I am truly sorry. I conceive the future to be more important than this present, how-

5—Planet—March

ever. This, Bryan Barrett, is your first step to wealth and power. A financial gulf must be created as an additional precaution between you and her. A gulf that a poverty-stricken person can never cross. She is poor. She will always be poor..."

IT was strange the way that nightmarish week turned into a month, that month into a year. Hannicut, editor of *The Daily News-Star*, performed a blunder from the viewpoint of the man who owned that newspaper and a hundred others throughout the world: he printed a story which told the truth about a recent labor-big business dispute. Hannicut's boss fired him, and in elevating Bryan Barret to the post warned him never to give labor a break, else he'd go the way of Hannicut.

"Take the job," came the cold thoughts of the man from the future, and his name Bryan Barret now knew—Entoré.

Bryan got the first damp issue back from the press room the next day, and looked at it with sickened eyes. He left the office with his hat pulled low over his eyes. Newsboys were hawking the edition—big scareheads which told of another strike in the coal mines, and never mentioned one word about the strike a certain big-business corporation was pulling against the government. Which never said a thing about the filibuster a certain senator had pulled in Congress to defeat a pro-minority bill.

In the second week of Bryan's editorship, he started to leave the office. Back in Bryan's hotel suite, Entoré, man from the future, sent another wordless command.

"Do not leave the office now."

"No?" Bryan muttered the word from the graying mustache he now wore.

"No. Two men are waiting downstairs—two rowdies from the Freedom For All League. They are intending to throw bricks."

Bryan's fists clenched. "There are no rowdies in the Freedom For All League. No matter what the newspapers claim."

"These men once knew you, when you fought tyranny together. They are law-abiding men. But something has snapped in them. In their eyes, you are a traitor.

They could never punish you by law. They are willing to sacrifice their own lives if they can kill you."

"Thanks."

Bryan sank into a chair in the corner of his office. His head bowed, and he knew there was gray in his hair, gray that the last year had put there. Later Entoré spoke again. Bryan left.

He had no sooner reached the street and signaled a taxi than Entoré spoke again. "Do not take that taxi. Walk one block left. The Alpha Group. That taxi will have a minor street accident. Among those who gather in the crowd will be she."

Bryan stood with his hand upraised. The taxi was sloping in toward him. His heart thudded. He felt a voiceless, impassioned longing, as if a mind, a human mind, were reaching across distances and touching his without saying anything. Her mind. Then he turned and walked one block left and took another taxi. He sat in the taxi, cold and graying, a man who was rising in power and wealth as the editor of a great metropolitan daily. A man who by all the rules of human conduct was a quisling of the worst sort. Yet, could *they*, his former friends and fellow fighters, know what hell he was going through now because he was looking farther into the future than they could ever hope to look? They were fighting against the corruptness of present civilization. Someday their fight would bear fruit in a nation-wide, and later on a world-wide, Utopia. Bryan Barret had been forced to look farther ahead than that. To and beyond the year 800,000 A.D. They would never understand.

"Turn your head to the right," came the command.

Automatically, Bryan turned his head. "Why?" he asked dully.

"The Gamma Group, seven years from now. Had you kept your eyes on the left side of the street, *punctus* nineteen of the Gamma group would have occurred. You would have seen a woman who resembled your mother so strongly that later on this week you would write a letter to her in your hometown, wondering if she had been in New York. She would have answered quickly, wondering why you

wrote so seldom, and telling you she hadn't been in New York, but that, come to think of it, she would make the trip to see you. You would have met her in Penn Station, and in the excitement would have lost your billfold. A traveller would have found the billfold, taken the money, and dropped the billfold in a drawer at his home. Seven years later, his wife, cleaning house, would have found the bill-fold and returned it to you. You would have rewarded the woman. A few days later, you would meet her on the street; with her, a friend."

"She!" Bryan interposed huskily.

"YES" Entoré said. "The possibilities of meeting her through the Gamma Group of events are the shadowy ones. One by one I am destroying the possibility of events both in the Delta and the Gamma Groups. But both will be relatively strong long after the Alpha Group no longer exists."

Bryan went back to his hotel suite without eating. Entoré was there, staring at him with impersonal, cold glance.

Bryan said, his hand still on the closed door, "I won't be able to stand much more of this."

Entoré leaned forward on the console of his machine. "I, too, am sacrificing," he pointed out.

"Are you?" Bryan's eyes and voice tore across at him with sarcasm. "You can disappear back to your own time for an hour, a week, a year, if you choose, and return back to this same second of time without my being aware that you had gone. You have relief from the vigil. I have none. Ten years?" His laugh was brittle. "I'll go crazy!"

Entoré said nothing.

Bryan ground out, "You'd want me confined in a sanatorium, Entoré. That would be similar to death, as far as destroying the Groups goes. No, thanks. I'll hang on."

He looked back at Entoré, as impersonally as Entoré was looking at him. Bryan thought, as he looked at the assemblage of machinery. *He's shadowy, vague. He has no real substance in this world. I can see through him and his*

machinery, a little. But he's partly solid. I've touched the machine. I've had to push hard to get my hand through. Maybe a bullet . . .

He thrust the thought away, seeing in a flash what horrors it could bring. Kill Entoré? Kill him? He who had, with his own science of a far future, assembled groups of event-data which alone could guide Bryan Barret, diversifal, along the path he must take, rather than the path he would normally take? And yet, what if some day, in a burst of rage . . . ?

Bryan Barret planned nothing of that sort. Another year passed, and another. The circulation of *The Daily News-Star* rose. Bryan could have pointed to Entoré, when rich friends pointed to Bryan as one of the great editors of the times. Entoré could look around corners, see what was coming from the future. Entoré could scoop them all. If a war was going to break out, Bryan could have correspondents on the spot days before the event. If there was to be a mine explosion, Bryan could, if he wished, write the story ahead of time, himself. His salary rose to a fabulous figure. And he remembered, hollowly, Entoré's purpose. A financial gulf must be created between him and her. She would always be poor. . . .

Bryan Barret did not consciously plan to kill Entoré. It was merely that events pointed in that direction—events as sure and far-reaching as those events of the Delta and Gamma Groups which now and again Entoré forced him to by-pass. There was the instance of the gun. Bryan was passing an alley-way in the fourth year of his association with Entoré. Had it not been for the reflection from the store window, Bryan would not have seen the assassin. He ducked as the gun roared. With a continuation of the motion, he hurled himself into the alley, for a long second wrestled mightily with death. He jerked the gun from the man's hands, threw him against the wall. His eyes widened.

"Drake!"

"Okay, Bryan," the shabbily dressed man spat at him. "I'll admit I was out to get you. I'll stay here until the police come. And when they try me, I'll tell

things to the courtroom you never would allow to get into your paper. How you and your boss put the pressure to bear, and disbanded the Freedom For All League."

Bryan paled, dropped the gun into his pocket. "Drake," he said, "get moving. Nothing happened. I was acting under my boss' orders when I printed that anti-League propaganda. I wouldn't have done it myself. But you wouldn't understand. Go on."

Bryan quickly turned away, walked in the other direction. By the time the crowd formed, both participants in the scene were gone. But something had snapped in Bryan's mind. He walked faster, faster, as fast as his thoughts. An hour later, he burst into his suite, his hand in his pocket around the gun.

"ENTORÉ!" he snapped, taking two stiff-legged steps toward the suspended creature. "All day, you've been in communication with me. Yet, as I was coming home from the office, somebody tried to kill me. Why didn't you warn me about that?"

Entoré's face remained cold. "Were you killed?"

"What does that matter? It was a lucky accident I wasn't. A matter of a reflection in a window, something even you couldn't have foreseen with your high and mighty science. Entoré, *you wanted me to die!*"

Entoré said nothing for awhile, his face a study. Finally, as if admitting something that had only hovered on the fringes of his mind: "Bryan, I suppose we have both at last come to hate each other. But I have never once tried to lead you into any situation that would mean your death."

"Except this evening!"

But already the force of Bryan's rage had died. Entoré's logic was indisputable. He hadn't been killed. He felt the cold, hard mass of the gun in his pocket. He wondered if Entoré knew about that. He wondered how deeply Entoré could probe into his thoughts.

Entoré repeated, with an abstraction that was entirely strange in him, "No, Bryan. No. I have never thought of

that, never thought of consciously plotting your death, although it would free me."

His eyes flickered; and Bryan, turning, went with the steps of an old man toward the bedroom. He took off the coat, hung it up. The gun was still in the pocket. Bryan tried to force the thought of the gun from his mind, to get the memory of it deep into his unconscious.

The gun stayed there in that coat for three years.

The Alpha Group was now destroyed. The Alpha Group, running thick with events which would have led him to her. And the Delta Group, too, was now so blocked off, and the probabilities of a meeting occurred in such long, involved chains, that Entoré could destroy *puncti* merely by dictating to Bryan Barret in such small matters as the color of a necktie, or a choice of dessert, or—well, how could the color of a necktie start a chain of events which would lead to her? This way: A tie bought hastily, worn once, disliked; given to the new hotel maid. The maid is making a quilt from old neckties, and several others are given to her. When she completes the quilt, she sells it to a small department store. The department store displays the quilt in the window. The maid informs Bryan, pridefully. On his way from lunch, Bryan feels obliged to stop by and look at the quilt. But he is in somewhat of a hurry, turns, looking at his watch, bumps head-on into *her*. . . . But Entoré prevented Bryan from buying the chartreuse necktie.

In the eighth year, the Delta Group of events ceased to exist. They were now in the shadowy realms of the Gamma Group. Those events which were far-flung echoes of the past.

"There's not much chance, now, eh?" Bryan queried.

"Not much chance."

Bryan sat down. He was forty years of age, and the years had treated him harshly. He was tired, in mind and body. Fine lines had been etched deep in his face; strands of gray ran thickly through his hair. He was tall, and gaunt, and inclined to stoop at the shoulders, as from a physical burden. He moved through life

with a slow, firm tread which was not so much an indication of his bodily strength as of his will, which he whipped to action as he would a stubborn animal.

Entoré had in no way changed.

"I would like," Bryan muttered, in the voice of a man asleep, "I would like to meet her."

"I know," said Entoré.

"Tomorrow night," said Bryan, "I am going incognito to a public meeting of the so-called United Liberty Lovers' League. It is a sham organization, masquerading under a name which indicates its opposite nature. I intend to expose the League in my paper."

"No," said Entoré.

Bryan looked up, his face savage. "Yes! Eight years ago, I deserted every ideal that made me worthy of life. I was in some measure responsible for the disbanding of a league that was fighting corruption—the kind of corruption my newspaper has dealt in. I intend to make one strong bid for my self-respect."

"You will no longer have your position if you print such a story. The man who owns the paper sponsors the organization you intend to expose."

"That's all right," said Bryan still savagely. He rose, pounding one fist with restrained emphasis into the palm of his left hand. "I've never gone against you, Entoré. Never. Not in the slightest detail. This time I must. If this is a step that will create a chain of events which is undesirable, there's still a way for you to lead me back to a safe path."

Entoré's depthless eyes flickered. His small mouth turned slowly hard. "If you wish," he said coldly. "But you must obey me in small particulars."

Bryan nodded curtly.

BRYAN BARRET never reached the meeting hall of the sham organization United Liberty Lovers' League the next night.

"Do not go by way of Columbus Circle," Entoré's thoughts came.

Bryan leaned forward, spoke to the taxi driver, giving him another route, a route that led toward death. Bryan saw the moving van coming with ponderous sure-

ness from a side-street, bearing down broadside on the taxi. The driver cramped the wheel hard, screamed. The monster loomed, and Bryan moved, his nerves pulling at his muscles like reins holding the head of a spirited horse. He halfway rolled from the middle of the seat, with one foot kicked the door lever and shoved the door open. He threw himself from the taxi, hit shoulder first in the street, scraped his face on hard pavement. He lay like one dead. When he came to, he arose from the crowd that circled him, pushed his way through like a swimmer breaking water. Somebody tried to stop him, but he went, staggering at first, and then quickly.

He got back in another taxi. Entoré did not speak to him once during that trip. He did not speak when Bryan came into the hotel suite. Bryan emptied his mind of coherence. He went into the bedroom, took off his torn coat. He put on another coat, and he tried not to realize that the gun was in that pocket.

Then he came out into the living-room and took a stance looking up at Entoré. "You tried to kill me," he said.

Entore said coldly, looking at the blood on his face, "I am ignorant of all events after the taxi changed course. You deliberately closed your mind to me. However, I am glad you didn't go to the League meeting. It would have set in motion a number of *puncti* which would have been hard to destroy. There now remains a chance—one bare chance that you will ever meet her. Once that *punctus* is destroyed, the Gamma Group will have been destroyed. You will be pleased to know—as I will be pleased—that our association can then be disbanded."

Bryan started to shake inwardly. Then the trembling was transmitted to his outward person.

"Entoré," he had to whisper, "I know something now I didn't know before. You're a superman, and you're a congenital liar. You can lie with a straight face when you know big events hang on your lies. More, you can convince yourself that your lies are true—and maybe that's a valuable survival characteristic. Because you lied to me when you first

appeared to me eight years ago."

He gulped in air, tired to control his trembling. He spoke again.

"Most of what you said was true. I believe most of it. But you just caught yourself up on one big lie. You knew how selfless I could be, because I believed in an ideal. You appealed to my selflessness by putting yourself in the same category. You told me it was your world of probability you were trying to destroy. Put that way, I could do nothing less than promise to collaborate with you completely. However, if by the destruction of one more *punctus*, the last chance of my meeting her is destroyed, then, in that same instant, your world will be destroyed, and you will be destroyed, too. You will cease to exist. Yet you speak of disbanding our association. If you spoke the truth, it would be disbanded automatically—and you would not have a chance to be pleased or displeased. Entoré," said Bryan, reaching into the pocket and taking out the gun, "you have tried to kill me once too often. You won't get another chance."

He fired. He fired point-blank. And in his innermost heart he did not think he would succeed, did not want to succeed.

The bullet struck Entoré in the chest.

ENTORE'S passionless eyes widened. The delicate shadowy fingers clasped suddenly at the open hole in his chest that suddenly gushed with pink, barely discernible blood. He choked. Then he fell forward across the console of his machine.

"I am dying!" The hideous, incredulous thought-words ripped at Bryan's brain. He saw Entoré's fingers scrambling at buttons on the control of his suspended machinery. The machinery and Entoré suddenly disappeared, like smoke dissipated before a breeze. There was emptiness.

The gun dropped from Bryan's fingers, as if it were a serpent which had struck him. He stood frozen for a long moment, icy cold horror pouring along the winding arteries of his body, pervading his brain.

"Entoré!" he cried. "Entoré! Come back!"

But Entoré would not come back. In his last moments, Entoré had sent himself spinning back to his own time. Bryan

sank, stupefied, into a chair.

Bryan left the hotel suite the next morning. He moved slowly, like a blind man who feels he is liable to stumble over the brink of a precipice at any moment. He walked along the street listening for Entoré's thought-voice.

Suddenly he stopped in mid-pace, turned, walked back, and then a block in the other direction. He started to board a bus, then changed his mind.

At breakfast, he ordered mechanically—then, in fright, changed the order completely.

When the day was done, he lay in bed, rigid with nervous exhaustion, knowing he had set himself an impossible task. Two years of this. And his battle against mechanical or impulsive actions was no substitute for Entoré's knowledge of *puncti*.

He thought of Entoré, as he lay rigid in darkness. Entoré had been a liar. And yet his lie did not matter. The same result, the preservation of humanity in the far distant future, would be achieved whether Entoré's world or the other world ceased to have being. The murder of Entoré had solved nothing, but had left Bryan in a tangle of complexities from which there was only one straightforward path: suicide.

A month passed. And Bryan suddenly saw that insanity was another way out. He was surely growing insane. He was trying to control the minutiae of his existence, and doing so was like an entity in his own head, ripping his mind to shreds. He looked at his hand—large, bony—and it shook visibly. He looked straight down at the glass-top of his desk, and saw a hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed specter. He sank back into his chair, closed his eyes wearily. And as he sat thus, he made his decision.

With the decision came a vast, flooding peace, a cauterizing of the disease that was growing in his mind. He opened his eyes as if he were looking on a new world. A world where he, Bryan Barret, did as he pleased without censorship from Entoré or from himself. He rose quickly.

On his desk, he heard the rustle of papers. He turned, filled with a drunken elation. The wind was flicking over pages

of the rival newspaper on his desk much as a human hand could flick them over. Bryan put a paperweight on each corner, sank gloatingly into his chair. Events were flowing as they should flow, even in the small matter of wind blowing a newspaper.

Small?

Something exploded in his brain like a bell struck violently.

He came to his feet, bent over the newspaper, staring at the advertisement which leaped with smashing impact toward his eyes. An advertisement smugly explaining the virtues of a musical comedy that was in its sixth month.

Years ago, Entoré had said something about a musical comedy. Of an acquaintance who would later show up in the Gamma Group with tickets for a musical comedy. Only, Entoré had destroyed that possibility by making certain Bryan did not make the acquaintance in the first place.

HE reached for the 'phone automatically. The wells of resistance had been pumped dry. That evening he sat in a rear theatre seat, far from the stage. And yet he saw her. Third act, second row, in the middle. Long before the show ended, he was standing at the stage-door, waiting for her to come out. She came soon. She halted in the door. Then she saw him. Without hesitance, she walked toward him and without saying anything, fell into step beside him and they walked down the street.

Their conversation until they sat in the restaurant with the dinner plates cleared away was nothing that either of them would remember. Then it was Bryan who spoke.

"You'd never married?"

"No. And you?"

"Never. We've been kept apart."

"I know," she said quietly. "Entoré."

He looked across the table at her, unable to feel the shock of that suddenly imparted information. Her name was Ann. She was small and dainty of body, but the beauty that had been hers was fading into the serene depth of her eyes.

He said at last, "Entoré came to you first, did he?"

"He did. And I refused him."

"Why?"

"Because I was living in the present, and eight hundred thousand years from now is eight hundred thousand years."

He struggled with that logic, but there were implications in it which escaped him. "But," he persisted, "the race of man would die. It would end because of us."

She leaned forward a little tensely, a little pleadingly, and the dark eyes flooded their inner beauty over her face so that he caught his breath. She wanted to explain something to him, but she had no words to say it. She sank back, mutely. He sat silently, holding himself in an iron control, and then it was that the barrier leaped up between them. For hours they sat there, talking of other things that neither would remember.

Finally she rose, quickly, holding her purse with both hands. "I must leave now," she told him. He rose, too. Panic flickered on her face, and her hands—thin fragile hands—wound around the purse. "I have a feeling—as strong as the feeling that your eyes were on me from the audience—that if I leave now, we'll never meet each other again. Do you want it that way. Do you *really* want it that way?"

"It's the way it must be," he said, and

it was as if his Nemesis, Entoré had forced the damning words from his lips.

A second after she had turned, walking so quickly that it seemed she was running away, turned and disappeared up the short flight of stairs toward the traffic-roaring street, he could still see the startled, destroying pain that wrenched her face. The incredulity that even the hope of the empty years of her life had been taken from her and left a harrowing memory of near-happiness only.

Only a second he stood there, remembering that tortured expression. Then a thunderbolt exploded inside him. *This is the present, and eight hundred thousand years is eight hundred thousand years—as long as eternity, as meaningless!*

"Ann!" he shouted—screamed the name as he stood on the street. She was not in sight. And he knew he would never see her again. The black, nauseating wind of self-hatred poured madly through his brain, and carried the mocking memory of Entoré. The last *punctus* of the Gamma Group of events had been dissipated. He was truly his own master again. He had the choice of facing straight ahead into the unwelcome future or—of fastening his mind on some more pleasant memory of the past, fastening it there permanently, and assuming the expression of an idiot.

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Black Amazon of Mars

A Novel by LEIGH BRACKETT

Grimly Eric John Stark slogged toward that ancient Martian city—with every step he cursed the talisman of Ban Cruach that flamed in his blood-stained belt. Behind him screamed the hordes of Ciaran, hungering for that magic jewel—ahead lay the dread abode of the Ice Creatures—at his side stalked the whispering spectre of Ban Cruach, urging him on to a battle Stark knew he must lose!

THROUGH ALL THE LONG cold hours of the Norland night the Martian had not moved nor spoken. At dusk of the day before Eric John Stark had brought him into the ruined tower and laid him down, wrapped in blankets, on the snow. He had built a fire of dead brush, and since then the two men had waited, alone in the vast wasteland that girdles the polar cap of Mars.

Now, just before dawn, Camar the Martian spoke.

"Stark."

"Yes?"

"I am dying."

"Yes."

"I will not reach Kushat."

"No."

Camar nodded. He was silent again.

The wind howled down from the northern ice, and the broken walls rose up

against it, brooding, gigantic, roofless now but so huge and sprawling that they seemed less like walls than cliffs of ebon stone. Stark would not have gone near them but for Camar. They were wrong, somehow, with a taint of forgotten evil still about them.

The big Earthman glanced at Camar, and his face was sad. "A man likes to die in his own place," he said abruptly. "I am sorry."

"The Lord of Silence is a great personage," Camar answered. "He does not mind the meeting place. No. It was not for that I came back into the Norlands."

He was shaken by an agony that was not of the body. "And I shall not reach Kushat!"

Stark spoke quietly, using the courtly High Martian almost as fluently as Camar.

"I have known that there was a burden heavier than death upon my brother's soul."

He leaned over, placing one large hand on the Martian's shoulder. "My brother has given his life for mine. Therefore, I will take his burden upon myself, if I can."

He did not want Camar's burden, whatever it might be. But the Martian had fought beside him through a long guerilla campaign among the harried tribes of the nearer moon. He was a good man of his hands, and in the end had taken the bullet that was meant for Stark, knowing quite well what he was doing. They were friends.

That was why Stark had brought Camar into the bleak north country, trying to reach the city of his birth. The Martian was driven by some secret demon. He was afraid to die before he reached Kushat.

And now he had no choice.

"I have sinned, Stark. I have stolen a holy thing. You're an outlander, you would not know of Ban Cruach, and the talisman that he left when he went away forever beyond the Gates of Death."

Camar flung aside the blankets and sat up, his voice gaining a febrile strength.

"I was born and bred in the Thieves' Quarter under the Wall. I was proud of my skill. And the talisman was a challenge. It was a treasured thing—so treasured that hardly a man has touched it since the days of Ban Cruach who made it. And that was

in the days when men still had the lustre on them, before they forgot that they were gods.

"'Guard well the Gates of Death,' he said, 'that is the city's trust. And keep the talisman always, for the day may come when you will need its strength. Who holds Kushat holds Mars—and the talisman will keep the city safe.'"

"I was a thief, and proud. And I stole the talisman."

His hands went to his girdle, a belt of worn leather with a boss of battered steel. But his fingers were already numb.

"Take it, Stark. Open the boss—there, on the side, where the beast's head is carved . . ."

STARK took the belt from Camar and found the hidden spring. The rounded top of the boss came free. Inside it was something wrapped in a scrap of silk.

"I had to leave Kushat," Camar whispered. "I could never go back. But it was enough—to have taken that."

He watched, shaken between awe and pride and remorse, as Stark unwrapped the bit of silk.

Stark had discounted most of Camar's talk as superstition, but even so he had expected something more spectacular than the object he held in his palm.

It was a lens, some four inches across—man-made, and made with great skill, but still only a bit of crystal. Turning it about, Stark saw that it was not a simple lens, but an intricate interlocking of many facets. Incredibly complicated, hypnotic if one looked at it too long.

"What is its use?" he asked of Camar.

"We are as children. We have forgotten. But there is a legend, a belief—that Ban Cruach himself made the talisman as a sign that he would not forget us, and would come back when Kushat is threatened. Back through the Gates of Death, to teach us again the power that was his!"

"I do not understand," said Stark. "What are the Gates of Death?"

Camar answered, "It is a pass that opens into the black mountains beyond Kushat. The city stands guard before it—why, no man remembers, except that it is a great trust."

His gaze feasted on the talisman.

Stark said, "You wish me to take this to Kushat?"

"Yes. Yes! And yet . . ." Camar looked at Stark, his eyes filling suddenly with tears. "No. The North is not used to strangers. With me, you might have been safe. But alone . . . No, Stark. You have risked too much already. Go back, out of the Norlands, while you can."

He lay back on the blankets. Stark saw that a bluish pallor had come into the hollows of his cheeks.

"Camar," he said. And again, "Camar!" "Yes?"

"Go in peace, Camar. I will take the talisman to Kushat."

The Martian sighed, and smiled, and Stark was glad that he had made the promise.

"The riders of Mekh are wolves," said Camar suddenly. "They hunt these gorges. Look out for them."

"I will."

Stark's knowledge of the geography of this part of Mars was vague indeed, but he knew that the mountain valleys of Mekh lay ahead and to the north, between him and Kushat. Camar had told him of these upland warriors. He was willing to heed the warning.

Camar had done with talking. Stark knew that he had not long to wait. The wind spoke with the voice of a great organ. The moons had set and it was very dark outside the tower, except for the white glimmering of the snow. Stark looked up at the brooding walls, and shivered. There was a smell of death already in the air.

To keep from thinking, he bent closer to the fire, studying the lens. There were scratches on the bezel, as though it had been held sometime in a clamp, or setting, like a jewel. An ornament, probably, worn as a badge of rank. Strange ornament for a barbarian king, in the dawn of Mars. The firelight made tiny dancing sparks in the endless inner facets. Quite suddenly, he had a curious feeling that the thing was alive.

A pang of primitive and unreasoning fear shot through him, and he fought it down. His vision was beginning to blur, and he shut his eyes, and in the darkness

it seemed to him that he could see and hear . . .

HE STARTED UP, shaken now with an eerie terror, and raised his hand to hurl the talisman away. But the part of him that had learned with much pain and effort to be civilized made him stop, and think.

He sat down again. An instrument of hypnosis? Possibly. And yet that fleeting touch of sight and sound had not been his own, out of his own memories.

He was tempted now, fascinated, like a child that plays with fire. The talisman had been worn somehow. Where? On the breast? On the brow?

He tried the first, with no result. Then he touched the flat surface of the lens to his forehead.

The great tower of stone rose up monstrous to the sky. It was whole, and there were pallid lights within that stirred and flickered, and it was crowned with a shimmering darkness.

He lay outside the tower, on his belly, and he was filled with fear and a great anger, and a loathing such as turns the bones to water. There was no snow. There was ice everywhere, rising to half the tower's height, sheathing the ground.

Ice. Cold and clear and beautiful—and deadly.

He moved. He glided snakelike, with infinite caution, over the smooth surface. The tower was gone, and far below him was a city. He saw the temples and the palaces, the glittering lovely city beneath him in the ice, blurred and fairylike and strange, a dream half glimpsed through crystal.

He saw the Ones that lived there, moving slowly through the streets. He could not see them clearly, only the vague shining of their bodies, and he was glad.

He hated them, with a hatred that conquered even his fear, which was great indeed.

He was not Eric John Stark. He was Ban Cruach.

The tower and the city vanished, swept away on a reeling tide.

He stood beneath a scarp of black rock, notched with a single pass. The cliffs hung

over him, leaning out their vast bulk as though to crush him, and the narrow mouth of the pass was full of evil laughter where the wind went by.

He began to walk forward, into the pass. He was quite alone.

The light was dim and strange at the bottom of that cleft. Little veils of mist crept and clung between the ice and the rock, thickened, became more dense as he went farther and farther into the pass. He could not see, and the wind spoke with many tongues, piping in the crevices of the cliffs.

All at once there was a shadow in the mist before him, a dim gigantic shape that moved toward him, and he knew that he looked at death. He cried out . . .

It was Stark who yelled in blind atavistic fear, and the echo of his own cry brought him up standing, shaking in every limb. He had dropped the talisman. It lay gleaming in the snow at his feet, and the alien memories were gone—and Camar was dead.

After a time he crouched down, breathing harshly. He did not want to touch the lens again. The part of him that had learned to fear strange gods and evil spirits with every step he took, the primitive aboriginal that lay so close under the surface of his mind, warned him to leave it, to run away, to desert this place of death and ruined stone.

He forced himself to take it up. He did not look at it. He wrapped it in the bit of silk and replaced it inside the iron boss, and clasped the belt around his waist. Then he found the small flask that lay with his gear beside the fire and took a long pull, and tried to think rationally of the thing that had happened.

Memories. Not his own, but the memories of Ban Cruach, a million years ago in the morning of a world. Memories of hate, a secret war against unhuman beings that dwelt in crystal cities cut in the living ice, and used these ruined towers for some dark purpose of their own.

Was that the meaning of the talisman, the power that lay within it? Had Ban Cruach, by some elder and forgotten science, imprisoned the echoes of his own mind in the crystal?

Why? Perhaps as a warning, as a reminder of ageless, alien danger beyond the Gates of Death?

Suddenly one of the beasts tethered outside the ruined tower started up from its sleep with a hissing snarl.

Instantly Stark became motionless.

They came silently on their padded feet, the rangy mountain brutes moving daintily through the sprawling ruin. Their riders too were silent—tall men with fierce eyes and russet hair, wearing leather coats and carrying each a long, straight spear.

There were a score of them around the tower in the windy gloom. Stark did not bother to draw his gun. He had learned very young the difference between courage and idiocy.

He walked out toward them, slowly lest one of them be startled into spearing him, yet not slowly enough to denote fear. And he held up his right hand and gave them greeting.

They did not answer him. They sat their restive mounts and stared at him, and Stark knew that Camar had spoken the truth. These were the riders of Mekh, and they were wolves.

II

STARK WAITED, UNTIL THEY should tire of their own silence.

Finally one demanded, "Of what country are you?"

He answered, "I am called N'Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe."

It was the name they had given him, the half-human aboriginals who had raised him in the blaze and thunder and bitter frosts of Mercury.

"A stranger," said the leader, and smiled. He pointed at the dead Camar and asked, "Did you slay him?"

"He was my friend," said Stark, "I was bringing him home to die."

Two riders dismounted to inspect the body. One called up to the leader, "He was from Kushat, if I know the breed, Thord! And he has not been robbed." He proceeded to take care of that detail himself.

"A stranger," repeated the leader, Thord. "Bound for Kushat, with a man

of Kushat. Well, I think you will come with us, stranger."

Stark shrugged. And with the long spears pricking him, he did not resist when the tall Thord plundered him of all he owned except his clothes—and Camar's belt, which was not worth the stealing. His gun Thord flung contemptuously away.

One of the men brought Stark's beast and Camar's from where they were tethered, and the Earthman mounted—as usual, over the violent protest of the creature, which did not like the smell of him. They moved out from under the shelter of the walls, into the full fury of the wind.

For the rest of that night, and through the next day and the night that followed it they rode eastward, stopping only to rest the beasts and chew on their rations of jerked meat.

To Stark, riding a prisoner, it came with full force that this was the North country, half a world away from the Mars of spaceships and commerce and visitors from other planets. The future had never touched these wild mountains and barren plains. The past held pride enough.

To the north, the horizon showed a strange and ghostly glimmer where the barrier wall of the polar pack reared up, gigantic against the sky. The wind blew, down from the ice, through the mountain gorges, across the plains, never ceasing. And here and there the cryptic towers rose, broken monoliths of stone. Stark remembered the vision of the talisman, the huge structure crowned with eerie darkness. He looked upon the ruins with loathing and curiosity. The men of Mekh could tell him nothing.

Thord did not tell Stark where they were taking him, and Stark did not ask. It would have been an admission of fear.

In mid-afternoon of the second day they came to a lip of rock where the snow was swept clean, and below it was a sheer drop into a narrow valley. Looking down, Stark saw that on the floor of the valley, up and down as far as he could see, were men and beasts and shelters of hide and brush, and fires burning. By the hundreds, by the several thousand, they camped under the cliffs, and their voices rose up on the thin air in a vast deep murmur that was

deafening after the silence of the plains.

A war party, gathered now, before the thaw. Stark smiled. He became curious to meet the leader of this army.

They found their way single file along a winding track that dropped down the cliff face. The wind stopped abruptly, cut off by the valley walls. They came in among the shelters of the camp.

Here the snow was churned and soiled and melted to slush by the fires. There were no women in the camp, no sign of the usual cheerful rabble that follows a barbarian army. There were only men—hillmen and warriors all, tough-handed killers with no thought but battle.

They came out of their holes to shout at Thord and his men, and stare at the stranger. Thord was flushed and jovial with importance.

"I have no time for you," he shouted back. "I go to speak with the Lord Ciaran."

Stark rode impassively, a dark gaint with a face of stone. From time to time he made his beast curvet, and laughed at himself inwardly for doing it.

They came at length to a shelter larger than the others, but built exactly the same and no more comfortable. A spear was thrust into the snow beside the entrance, and from it hung a black pennant with a single bar of silver across it, like lightning in a night sky. Beside it was a shield with the same device. There were no guards.

Thord dismounted, bidding Stark to do the same. He hammered on the shield with the hilt of his sword, announcing himself.

"Lord Ciaran! It is Thord—with a captive."

A voice, toneless and strangely muffled, spoke from within.

"Enter, Thord."

Thord pushed aside the hide curtain and went in, with Stark at his heels.

THE DIM DAYLIGHT did not penetrate the interior. Cressets burned, giving off a flickering brilliance and a smell of strong oil. The floor of packed snow was carpeted with furs, much worn. Otherwise there was no adornment, and no furniture but a chair and a table, both dark with age and use, and a pallet of

skins in one shadowy corner with what seemed to be a heap of rags upon it.

In the chair sat a man.

He seemed very tall, in the shaking light of the cressets. From neck to thigh his lean body was cased in black link mail, and under that a tunic of leather, dyed black. Across his knees he held a sable axe, a great thing made for the shearing of skulls, and his hands lay upon it gently, as though it were a toy he loved.

His head and face were covered by a thing that Stark had seen before only in very old paintings—the ancient war-mask of the inland Kings of Mars. Wrought of black and gleaming steel, it presented an unhuman visage of slitted eyeholes and a barred slot for breathing. Behind, it sprang out in a thin, soaring sweep, like a dark wing edge-on in flight.

The intent, expressionless scrutiny of that mask was bent, not upon Thord, but upon Eric John Stark.

The hollow voice spoke again, from behind the mask. "Well?"

"We were hunting in the gorges to the south," said Thord. "We saw a fire . . ." He told the story, of how they had found the stranger and the body of the man from Kushat.

"Kushat!" said the Lord Ciaran softly. "Ah! And why, stranger, were you going to Kushat?"

"My name is Stark. Eric John Stark, Earthman, out of Mercury." He was tired of being called stranger. Quite suddenly, he was tired of the whole business.

"Why should I not go to Kushat? Is it against some law, that a man may not go there in peace without being hounded all over the Norlands? And why do the men of Mekh make it their business? They have nothing to do with the city."

Thord held his breath, watching with delighted anticipation.

The hands of the man in armor caressed the axe. They were slender hands, smooth and sinewy—small hands, it seemed, for such a weapon.

"We make what we will our business, Eric John Stark." He spoke with a peculiar gentleness. "I have asked you. Why were you going to Kushat?"

"Because," Stark answered with equal

restraint, "my comrade wanted to go home to die."

"It seems a long, hard journey, just for dying." The black helm bent forward, in an attitude of thought. "Only the condemned or banished leave their cities, or their clans. Why did your comrade flee Kushat?"

A voice spoke suddenly from out of the heap of rags that lay on the pallet in the shadows of the corner. A man's voice, deep and husky, with the harsh quaver of age or madness in it.

"Three men beside myself have fled Kushat, over the years that matter. One died in the spring floods. One was caught in the moving ice of winter. One lived. A thief named Camar, who stole a certain talisman."

Stark said, "My comrade was called Greshi." The leather belt weighed heavy about him, and the iron boss seemed hot against his belly. He was beginning, now, to be afraid.

THE LORD CIARAN spoke, ignoring Stark. "It was the sacred talisman of Kushat. Without it, the city is like a man without a soul."

As the Veil of Tanit was to Carthage, Stark thought, and reflected on the fate of that city after the Veil was stolen.

"The nobles were afraid of their own people," the man in armor said. "They did not dare to tell that it was gone. But we know."

"And," said Stark, "you will attack Kushat before the thaw, when they least expect you."

"You have a sharp mind, stranger. Yes. But the great wall will be hard to carry, even so. If I came, bearing in my hands the talisman of Ban Cruach . . ."

He did not finish, but turned instead to Thord. "When you plundered the dead man's body, what did you find?"

"Nothing, Lord. A few coins, a knife, hardly worth the taking."

"And you, Eric John Stark. What did you take from the body?"

With perfect truth he answered, "Nothing."

"Thord," said the Lord Ciaran, "search him."

Thord came smiling up to Stark and ripped his jacket open.

With uncanny swiftness, the Earthman moved. The edge of one broad hand took Thord under the ear, and before the man's knees had time to sag Stark had caught his arm. He turned, crouching forward, and pitched Thord headlong through the door flap.

He straightened and turned again. His eyes held a feral glint. "The man has robbed me once," he said. "It is enough."

He heard Thord's men coming. Three of them tried to jam through the entrance at once, and he sprang at them. He made no sound. His fists did the talking for him, and then his feet, as he kicked the stunned barbarians back upon their leader.

"Now," he said to the Lord Ciaran, "will we talk as men?"

The man in armor laughed, a sound of pure enjoyment. It seemed that the gaze behind the mask studied Stark's savage face, and then lifted to greet the sullen Thord who came back into the shelter, his cheeks flushed crimson with rage.

"Go," said the Lord Ciaran. "The stranger and I will talk."

"But Lord," he protested, glaring at Stark, "it is not safe . . ."

"My dark mistress looks after my safety," said Ciaran, stroking the axe across his knees. "Go."

"Thord went."

The man in armor was silent then, the blind mask turned to Stark, who met that eyeless gaze and was silent also. And the bundle of rags in the shadows straightened slowly and became a tall old man with rusty hair and beard, through which peered craggy juts of bone and two bright, small points of fire, as though some wicked flame burned within him.

He shuffled over and crouched at the feet of the Lord Ciaran, watching the Earthman. And the man in armor leaned forward.

"I will tell you something, Eric John Stark. I am a bastard, but I come of the blood of kings. My name and rank I must make with my own hands. But I will set them high, and my name will ring in the Norlands!"

"I will take Kushat, Who holds Kushat,

holds Mars—and the power and the riches that lie beyond the Gates of Death!"

"I have seen them," said the old man, and his eyes blazed. "I have seen Ban Cruach the mighty. I have seen the temples and the palaces glitter in the ice. I have seen *Them*, the shining ones. Oh, I have seen them, the beautiful, hideous ones!"

He glanced sidelong at Stark, very cunning. "That is why Otar is mad, stranger. *He has seen.*"

A chill swept Stark. He too had seen, not with his own eyes but with the mind and memories of Ban Cruach, of a million years ago.

Then it had been no illusion, the fantastic vision opened to him by the talisman now hidden in his belt! If this old madman had seen. . . .

"What beings lurk beyond the Gates of Death I do not know," said Ciaran. "But my dark mistress will test their strength—and I think my red wolves will hunt them down, once they get a smell of plunder."

"The beautiful, terrible ones," whispered Otar. "And oh, the temples and the palaces, and the great towers of stone!"

"Ride with me, Stark," said the Lord Ciaran abruptly. "Yield up the talisman, and be the shield at my back. I have offered no other man that honor."

Stark asked slowly, "Why do you choose me?"

"We are of one blood, Stark, though we be strangers."

The Earthman's cold eyes narrowed. "What would your red wolves say to that? And what would Otar say? Look at him, already stiff with jealousy, and fear lest I answer, 'Yes'."

"I do not think you would be afraid of either of them."

"On the contrary," said Stark, "I am a prudent man." He paused. "There is one other thing. I will bargain with no man until I have looked into his eyes. Take off your helm, Ciaran—and then perhaps we will talk!"

Otar's breath made a snakelike hissing between his toothless gums, and the hands of the Lord Ciaran tightened on the haft of the axe,

"No!" he whispered. "That I can never do."

Otar rose to his feet, and for the first time Stark felt the full strength that lay in this strange old man.

"Would you look upon the face of destruction?" he thundered. "Do you ask for death? Do you think a thing is hidden behind a mask of steel without a reason, that you demand to see it?"

He turned. "My Lord," he said. "By tomorrow the last of the clans will have joined us. After that, we must march. Give this Earthman to Thord, for the time that remains—and you will have the talisman."

The blank, blind mask was unmoving, turned toward Stark, and the Earthman thought that from behind it came a faint sound that might have been a sigh.

Then . . .

"Thord!" cried the Lord Ciaran, and lifted up the axe.

III

THE FLAMES LEAPED HIGH from the fire in the windless gorge. Men sat around it in a great circle, the wild riders out of the mountain valleys of Mekh. They sat with the curbed and shivering eagerness of wolves around a dying quarry. Now and again their white teeth showed in a kind of silent laughter, and their eyes watched.

"He is strong," they whispered, one to the other. "He will live the night out, surely!"

On an outcrop of rock sat the Lord Ciaran, wrapped in a black cloak, holding the great axe in the crook of his arm. Beside him, Otar huddled in the snow.

Close by, the long spears had been driven deep and lashed together to make a scaffolding, and upon this frame was hung a man. A big man, iron-muscled and very lean, the bulk of his shoulders filling the space between the bending shafts. Eric John Stark of Earth, out of Mercury.

He had already been scourged without mercy. He sagged of his own weight between the spears, breathing in harsh sobs, and the trampled snow around him was spotted red.

Thord was wielding the lash. He had stripped off his own coat, and his body glistened with sweat in spite of the cold. He cut his victim with great care, making the long lash sing and crack. He was proud of his skill.

Stark did not cry out.

Presently Thord stepped back, panting, and looked at the Lord Ciaran. And the black helm nodded.

Thord dropped the whip. He went up to the big dark man and lifted his head by the hair.

"Stark," he said, and shook the head roughly. "Stranger!"

Eyes opened and stared at him, and Thord could not repress a slight shiver. It seemed that the pain and indignity had wrought some evil magic on this man he had ridden with, and thought he knew. He had seen exactly the same gaze in a big snow-cat caught in a trap, and he felt suddenly that it was not a man he spoke to, but a predatory beast.

"Stark," he said. "Where is the talisman of Ban Cruach?"

The Earthman did not answer.

Thord laughed. He glanced up at the sky, where the moons rode low and swift.

"The night is only half gone. Do you think you can last it out?"

The cold, cruel, patient eyes watched Thord. There was no reply.

Some quality of pride in that gaze angered the barbarian. It seemed to mock him, who was so sure of his ability to loosen a reluctant tongue.

"You think I cannot make you talk, don't you? You don't know me, stranger! You don't know Thord, who can make the rocks speak out if he will!"

He reached out with his free hand and struck Stark across the face.

It seemed impossible that anything so still could move so quickly. There was an ugly flash of teeth, and Thord's wrist was caught above the thumb-joint. He bellowed, and the iron jaws closed down, worrying the bone.

Quite suddenly, Thord screamed. Not for pain, but for panic. And the rows of watching men swayed forward, and even the Lord Ciaran rose up, startled.

"Hark!" ran the whispering around the

fire. "Hark how he growls!"

Thord had let go of Stark's hair and was beating him about the head with his clenched fist. His face was white.

"Werewolf!" he screamed. "Let me go, beast-thing! Let me go!"

But the dark man clung to Thord's wrist, snarling, and did not hear. After a bit there came the dull crack of bone.

Stark opened his jaws. Thord ceased to strike him. He backed off slowly, staring at the torn flesh. Stark had sunk down to the length of his arms.

With his left hand, Thord drew his knife. The Lord Ciaran stepped forward. "Wait, Thord!"

"It is a thing of evil," whispered the barbarian. "Warlock. Werewolf. Beast."

He sprang at Stark.

THE MAN in armor moved, very swiftly, and the great axe went whirling through the air. It caught Thord squarely where the cords of his neck ran into the shoulder—caught, and shore on through.

There was a silence in the valley.

The Lord Ciaran walked slowly across the trampled snow and took up his axe again.

"I will be obeyed," he said. "And I will not stand for fear, not of god, man, nor devil." He gestured toward Stark. "Cut him down. And see that he does not die."

He strode away, and Otar began to laugh.

From a vast distance, Stark heard that shrill, wild laughter. His mouth was full of blood, and he was mad with a cold fury.

A cunning that was purely animal guided his movements then. His head fell forward, and his body hung inert against the thongs. He might almost have been dead.

A knot of men came toward him. He listened to them. They were hesitant and afraid. Then, as he did not move, they plucked up courage and came closer, and one prodded him gently with the point of his spear.

"Prick him well," said another. "Let us be sure!"

The sharp point bit a little deeper. A few drops of blood welled out and joined the small red streams that ran from the weals of the lash. Stark did not stir.

The spearman grunted. "He is safe enough now."

Stark felt the knife blades working at the thongs. He waited. The rawhide snapped, and he was free.

He did not fall. He would not have fallen then if he had taken a death wound. He gathered his legs under him and sprang.

He picked up the spearman in that first rush and flung him into the fire. Then he began to run toward the place where the scaly mounts were herded, leaving a trail of blood behind him on the snow.

A man loomed up in front of him. He saw the shadow of a spear and swerved, and caught the haft in his two hands. He wrenched it free and struck down with the butt of it, and went on. Behind him he heard voices shouting and the beginning of turmoil.

The Lord Ciaran turned and came back, striding fast.

There were men before Stark now, many men, the circle of watchers breaking up because there had been nothing more to watch. He gripped the long spear. It was a good weapon, better than the flint-tipped stick with which the boy N'Chaka had hunted the giant lizard of the rocks.

His body curved into a half crouch. He voiced one cry, the challenging scream of a predatory killer, and went in among the men.

He did slaughter with that spear. They were not expecting attack. They were not expecting anything. Stark had sprung to life too quickly. And they were afraid of him. He could smell the fear on them. Fear not of a man like themselves, but of a creature less and more than man.

He killed, and was happy.

They fell away from him, the wild riders of Mekh. They were sure now that he was a demon. He raged among them with the bright spear, and they heard again that sound that should not have come from a human throat, and their superstitious terror rose and sent them scrambling out of his path, trampling on each other in childish panic.

He broke through, and now there was nothing between him and escape but two mounted men who guarded the herd.

Being mounted, they had more courage. They felt that even a warlock could not stand against their charge. They came at him as he ran, the padded feet of their beasts making a muffled drumming in the snow.

Without breaking stride, Stark hurled his spear.

IT DROVE through one man's body and tumbled him off, so that he fell under his comrade's mount and fouled its legs. It staggered and reared up, hissing, and Stark fled on.

Once he glanced over his shoulder. Through the milling, shouting crowd of men he glimpsed a dark, mailed figure with a winged mask, going through the ruck with a loping stride and bearing a sable axe raised high for the throwing.

Stark was close to the herd now. And they caught his scent.

The Norland brutes had never liked the smell of him, and now the reek of blood upon him was enough in itself to set them wild. They began to hiss and snarl uneasily, rubbing their reptilian flanks together as they wheeled around, staring at him with lambent eyes.

He rushed them, before they should quite decide to break. He was quick enough to catch one by the fleshy comb that served it for a forelock, held it with savage indifference to its squealing, and leaped to its back. Then he let it bolt, and as he rode it he yelled, a shrill brute cry that urged the creatures on to panic.

The herd broke, stampeding outward from its center like a bursting shell.

Stark was in the forefront. Clinging low to the scaly neck, he saw the men of Mekh scattered and churned and tramped into the snow by the flying pads. In and out of the shelters, kicking the brush walls down, lifting up their harsh reptilian voices, they went racketing through the camp, leaving behind them wreckage as of a storm. And Stark went with them.

He snatched a cloak from off the shoulders of some petty chieftain as he went by, and then, twisting cruelly on the fleshy

comb, beating with his fist at the creature's head, he got his mount turned in the way he wanted it to go, down the valley.

He caught one last glimpse of the Lord Ciaran, fighting to hold one of the creatures long enough to mount, and then a dozen striving bodies surged around him, and Stark was gone.

The beast did not slacken pace. It was as though it thought it could outrun the alien, bloody thing that clung to its back. The last fringes of the camp shot by and vanished in the gloom, and the clean snow of the lower valley lay open before it. The creature laid its belly to the ground and went, the white spray spurting from its heels.

Stark hung on. His strength was gone now, run out suddenly with the battle-madness. He became conscious now that he was sick and bleeding, that his body was one cruel pain. In that moment, more than in the hours that had gone before, he hated the black leader of the clans of Mekh.

That flight down the valley became a sort of ugly dream. Stark was aware of rock walls reeling past, and then they seemed to widen away and the wind came out of nowhere like the stroke of a great hammer, and he was on the open moors again.

The beast began to falter and slow down. Presently it stopped.

Stark scooped up snow to rub on his wounds. He came near to fainting, but the bleeding stopped and after that the pain was numbed to a dull ache. He wrapped the cloak around him and urged the beast to go on, gently this time, patiently, and after it had breathed it obeyed him, settling into the shuffling pace it could keep up for hours.

He was three days on the moors. Part of the time he rode in a sort of stupor, and part of the time he was feverishly alert, watching the skyline. Frequently he took the shapes of thrusting rocks for riders, and found what cover he could until he was sure they did not move. He was afraid to dismount, for the beast had no bridle. When it halted to rest he remained upon its back, shaking, his brow beaded with sweat.

The wind scoured his tracks clean as soon as he made them. Twice, in the distance, he did see riders, and one of those times he burrowed into a tall drift and stayed there for several hours.

The ruined towers marched with him across the bitter land, lonely giants fifty miles apart. He did not go near them.

He knew that he wandered a good bit, but he could not help it, and it was probably his salvation. In those tortured badlands, riven by ages of frost and flood, one might follow a man on a straight track between two points. But to find a single rider lost in that wilderness was a matter of sheer luck, and the odds were with Stark.

One evening at sunset he came out upon a plain that sloped upward to a black and towering scarp, notched with a single pass.

The light was level and blood-red, glittering on the frosty rock so that it seemed the throat of the pass was aflame with evil fires. To Stark's mind, essentially primitive and stripped now of all its acquired reason, that narrow cleft appeared as the doorway to the dwelling place of demons as horrible as the fabled creatures that roam the Darkside of his native world.

He looked long at the Gates of Death, and a dark memory crept into his brain. Memory of that nightmare experience when the talisman had made him seem to walk into that frightful pass, not as Stark, but as Ban Cruach.

He remembered Otar's words—I have seen Ban Cruach the mighty. Was he still there beyond those darkling gates, fighting his unimagined war, alone?

Again, in memory, Stark heard the evil piping of the wind. Again, the shadow of a dim and terrible shape loomed up before him . . .

He forced remembrance of that vision from his mind, by a great effort. He could not turn back now. There was no place to go.

His weary beast plodded on, and now Stark saw as in a dream that a great walled city stood guard before that awful Gate. He watched the city glide toward him through a crimson haze, and fancied he could see the ages clustered like birds around the towers.

He had reached Kushat, with the talisman of Ban Cruach still strapped in the bloodstained belt around his waist.

IV

HE STOOD IN A LARGE SQUARE, lined about with huckster's stalls and the booths of wine-sellers. Beyond were buildings, streets, a city. Stark got a blurred impression of a grand and brooding darkness, bulking huge against the mountains, as bleak and proud as they, and quite as ancient, with many ruins and deserted quarters.

He was not sure how he had come there, but he was standing on his own feet, and someone was pouring sour wine into his mouth. He drank it greedily. There were people around him, jostling, chattering, demanding answers to their questions. A girl's voice said sharply, "Let him be! Can't you see he's hurt?"

Stark looked down. She was slim and ragged, with black hair and large eyes yellow as a cat's. She held a leather bottle in her hands. She smiled at him and said, "I'm Thanis. Will you drink more wine?"

"I will," said Stark, and did, and then said, "Thank you, Thanis." He put his hand on her shoulder, to steady himself. It was a supple shoulder, surprisingly strong. He liked the feel of it.

The crowd was still churning around him, growing larger, and now he heard the tramp of military feet. A small detachment of men in light armor pushed their way through.

A very young officer whose breastplate hurt the eye with brightness demanded to be told at once who Stark was and why he had come there.

"No one crosses the moors in winter," he said, as though that in itself were a sign of evil intent.

"The clans of Mekh are crossing them," Stark answered. "An army, to take Kushat—one, two days behind me."

The crowd picked that up. Excited voices tossed it back and forth, and clamored for more news. Stark spoke to the officer.

"I will see your captain, and at once."

"You'll see the inside of a prison, more likely!" snapped the young man. "What's this nonsense about the clans of Mekh?"

Stark regarded him. He looked so long and so curiously that the crowd began to snicker and the officer's beardless face flushed pink to the ears.

"I have fought in many wars," said Stark gently. "And long ago I learned to listen, when someone came to warn me of attack."

"Better take him to the captain, Lugh," cried Thanis. "It's our skins too, you know, if there is war."

The crowd began to shout. They were all poor folk, wrapped in threadbare cloaks or tattered leather. They had no love for the guards. And whether there was war or not, their winter had been long and dull, and they were going to make the most of this excitement.

"Take him, Lugh! Let him warn the nobles. Let them think how they'll defend Kushat and the Gates of Death, now that the talisman is gone!"

"That is a lie!" Lugh shouted. "And you know the penalty for telling it. Hold your tongues, or I'll have you all whipped." He gestured angrily at Stark. "See if he is armed."

One of the soldiers stepped forward, but Stark was quicker. He slipped the thong and let the cloak fall, baring his upper body.

"The clansmen have already taken everything I owned," he said. "But they gave me something, in return."

The crowd stared at the half healed stripes that scarred him, and there was a drawing in of breath.

The soldier picked up the cloak and laid it over the Earthman's shoulders. And Lugh said sullenly, "Come, then."

Stark's fingers tightened on Thanis' shoulder. "Come with me, little one," he whispered. "Otherwise, I must crawl."

She smiled at him and came. The crowd followed.

The captain of the guards was a fleshy man with a smell of wine about him and a face already crumbling apart though his hair was not yet grey. He sat in a squat tower above the square, and he observed Stark with no particular interest.

"You had something to tell," said Lugh. "Tell it."

STARK TOLD THEM, leaving out all mention of Camar and the talisman. This was neither the time nor the man to hear that story. The captain listened to all he had to say about the gathering of the clans of Mekh, and then sat studying him with a bleary shrewdness.

"You have proof of all this?"

"These stripes. Their leader Ciaran ordered them laid on himself."

The captain sighed, and leaned back.

"Any wandering band of hunters could have scourged you," he said. "A nameless vagabond from the gods know where, and a lawless one at that, if I'm any judge of men—you probably deserved it."

He reached for wine, and smiled. "Look you, stranger. In the Norlands, no one makes war in the winter. And no one ever heard of Ciaran. If you hoped for a reward from the city, you overshot badly."

"The Lord Ciaran," said Stark, grimly controlling his anger, "will be battering at your gates within two days. And you will hear of him then."

"Perhaps. You can wait for him—in a cell. And you can leave Kushat with the first caravan after the thaw. We have enough rabble here without taking in more."

Thanis caught Stark by the cloak and held him back.

"Sir," she said, as though it were an unclean word. "I will vouch for the stranger."

The captain glanced at her. "You?"

"Sir, I am a free citizen of Kushat. According to law, I may vouch for him."

"If you scum of the Thieves' Quarter would practice the law as well as you prate it, we would have less trouble," growled the captain. "Very well, take the creature, if you want him. I don't suppose you've anything to lose."

Lugh laughed.

"Name and dwelling place," said the captain, and wrote them down. "Remember, he is not to leave the Quarter."

Thanis nodded. "Come," she said to Stark. He did not move, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the cap-

tain. His beard had grown in these last days, and his face was still scarred by Thord's blows and made wolfish with pain and fever. And now, out of this evil mask, his eyes were peering with a chill and terrible intensity at the soft-bellied man who sat and mocked him.

Thanis laid her hand on his rough cheek. "Come," she said. "Come and rest."

Gently she turned his head. He blinked and swayed, and she took him around the waist and led him unprotesting to the door.

There she paused, looking back.

"Sir," she said, very meekly, "news of this attack is being shouted through the Quarter now. If it *should* come, and it were known that you had the warning and did not pass it on . . ." She made an expressive gesture, and went out.

Lugh glanced uneasily at the captain. "She's right, sir. If by chance the man did tell the truth . . ."

The captain swore. "Rot. A rogue's tale. And yet . . ." He scowled indecisively, and then reached for parchment. "After all, it's a simple thing. Write it up, pass it on, and let the nobles do the worrying."

His pen began to scratch.

Thanis took Stark by steep and narrow ways, darkling now in the afterglow, where the city climbed and fell again over the uneven rock. Stark was aware of the heavy smells of spices and unfamiliar foods, and the musky undertones of a million generations swarmed together to spawn and die in these crowded catacombs of slate and stone.

There was a house, blending into other houses, close under the loom of the great Wall. There was a flight of steps, hollowed deep with use, twisting crazily around outer corners.

There was a low room, and a slender man named Balin, vaguely glimpsed, who said he was Thanis' brother. There was a bed of skins and woven cloths.

Stark slept.

HANDS and voices called him back. Strong hands shaking him, urgent voices. He started up growling, like an animal suddenly awaked, still lost in the dark mists of exhaustion. Balin swore,

and caught his fingers away.

"What is this you have brought home, Thanis? By the gods, it snapped at me!"

Thanis ignored him. "Stark," she said. "Stark! Listen. Men are coming. Soldiers. They will question you. Do you hear me?"

Stark said heavily, "I hear."

"Do not speak of *Camar!*"

Stark got to his feet, and Balin said hastily, "Peace! The thing is safe. I would not steal a death warrant!"

His voice had a ring of truth. Stark sat down again. It was an effort to keep awake. There was clamor in the street below. It was still night.

Balin said carefully, "Tell them what you told the captain, nothing more. They will kill you if they know."

A rough hand thundered at the door, and a voice cried, "Open up!"

Balin sauntered over to lift the bar. Thanis sat beside Stark, her hand touching his. Stark rubbed his face. He had been shaved and washed, his wounds rubbed with salve. The belt was gone, and his bloodstained clothing. He realized only then that he was naked, and drew a cloth around him. Thanis whispered, "The belt is there on that peg, under your cloak."

Balin opened the door, and the room was full of men.

Stark recognized the captain. There were others, four of them, young, old, intermediate, annoyed at being hauled away from their beds and their gaming tables at this hour. The sixth man wore the jewelled cuirass of a noble. He had a nice, a kind face. Grey hair, mild eyes, soft cheeks. A fine man, but ludicrous in the trappings of a soldier.

"Is this the man?" he asked, and the captain nodded.

"Yes." It was his turn to say Sir.

Balin brought a chair. He had a fine flourish about him. He wore a crimson jewel in his left ear, and every line of him was quick and sensitive, instinct with mockery. His eyes were brightly cynical, in a face worn lean with years of merry sinning. Stark liked him.

He was a civilized man. They all were—the noble, the captain, the lot of them. So civilized that the origins of their culture were forgotten half an age before the first

clay brick was laid in Babylon.

Too civilized, Stark thought. Peace had drawn their fangs and cut their claws. He thought of the wild clansmen coming fast across the snow, and felt a certain pity for the men of Kushat.

The noble sat down.

"This is a strange tale you bring, wanderer. I would hear it from your own lips."

Stark told it. He spoke slowly, watching every word, cursing the weariness that fogged his brain.

The noble, who was called Rogain, asked him questions. Where was the camp? How many men? What were the exact words of the Lord Ciaran, and who was he?

Stark answered, with meticulous care.

Rogain sat for some time lost in thought. He seemed worried and upset, one hand playing aimlessly with the hilt of his sword. A scholar's hand, without a callous on it.

"There is one thing more," said Rogain. "What business had you on the moors in winter?"

Stark smiled. "I am a wanderer by profession."

"Outlaw?" asked the captain, and Stark shrugged.

"Mercenary is a kinder word."

ROGAIN studied the pattern of stripes on the Earthman's dark skin. "Why did the Lord Ciaran, so-called, order you scourged?"

"I had thrashed one of his chieftains."

Rogain sighed and rose. He stood regarding Stark from under brooding brows, and at length he said, "It is a wild tale. I can't believe it—and yet, why should you lie?"

He paused, as though hoping that Stark would answer that and relieve him of worry.

Stark yawned. "The tale is easily proved. Wait a day or two."

"I will arm the city," said Rogain. "I dare not do otherwise. But I will tell you this." An astonishing unpleasant look came into his eyes. "If the attack does not come—if you have set a whole city by the ears for nothing—I will have you flayed alive and your body tumbled over the Wall for the carrion birds to feed on."

He strode out, taking his retinue with him. Balin smiled. "He will do it, too," he said, and dropped the bar.

Stark did not answer. He stared at Balin, and then at Thanis, and then at the belt hanging on the peg, in a curiously blank and yet penetrating fashion, like an animal that thinks its own thoughts. He took a deep breath. Then, as though he found the air clean of danger, he rolled over and went instantly to sleep.

Balin lifted his shoulders expressively. He grinned at Tanis. "Are you positive it's human?"

"He's beautiful," said Thanis, and tucked the cloths around him. "Hold your tongue." She continued to sit there, watching Stark's face as the slow dreams moved across it. Balin laughed.

It was evening again when Stark awoke. He sat up, stretching lazily. Thanis crouched by the hearthstone, stirring something savory in a blackened pot. She wore a red kirtle and a necklet of beaten gold, and her hair was combed out smooth and shining.

She smiled at him and rose, bringing him his own boots and trousers, carefully cleaned, and a tunic of leather tanned fine and soft as silk. Stark asked her where she got it.

"Balin stole it—from the baths where the nobles go. He said you might as well have the best." She laughed. "He had a devil of a time finding one big enough to fit you."

She watched with unashamed interest while he dressed. Stark said, "Don't burn the soup."

She put her tongue out at him. "Better be proud of that fine hide while you have it," she said. "There's no sign of attack."

Stark was aware of sounds that had not been there before—the pacing of men on the Wall above the house, the calling of the watch. Kushat was armed and ready—and his time was running out. He hoped that Ciaran had not been delayed on the moors.

Thanis said, "I should explain about the belt. When Balin undressed you, he saw Camar's name scratched on the inside of the boss. And, he can open a lizard's egg without harming the shell."

"What about you?" asked Stark.

She flexed her supple fingers. "I do well enough."

BALIN came in. He had been seeking news, but there was little to be had.

"The soldiers are grumbling about a false alarm," he said. "The people are excited, but more as though they were playing a game. Kushat has not fought a war for centuries." He sighed. "The pity of it is, Stark, I believe your story. And I'm afraid."

Thanis handed him a steaming bowl. "Here—employ your tongue with this. Afraid, indeed! Have you forgotten the Wall? No one has carried it since the city was built. Let them attack!"

Stark was amused. "For a child, you know much concerning war."

"I knew enough to save your skin!" she flared, and Balin smiled.

"She has you there, Stark. And speaking of skins . . ." He glanced up at the belt. "Or better, speaking of talismans, which we were not. How did you come by it?"

Stark told him. "He had a sin on his soul, did Camar. And—he was my friend."

Balin looked at him with deep respect. "You were a fool," he said "Look you. The thing is returned to Kushat. Your promise is kept. There is nothing for you here but danger, and were I you I would not wait to be flayed, or slain, or taken in a quarrel that is not yours."

"Ah," said Stark softly, "but it is mine. The Lord Ciaran made it so." He, too, glanced at the belt. "What of the talisman?"

"Return it where it came from," Thanis said. "My brother is a better thief than Camar. He can certainly do that."

"No!" said Balin, with surprising force. "We will keep it, Stark and I. Whether it has power, I do not know. But if it has—I think Kushat will need it, and in strong hands."

Stark said somebrelly, "It has power, the Talisman. Whether for good or evil, I don't know."

They looked at him, startled. But a touch of awe seemed to repress their curi-

osity.

He could not tell them. He was, somehow, reluctant to tell anyone of that dark vision of what lay beyond the Gates of Death, which the talisman of Ban Cruach had lent him.

Balin stood up. "Well, for good or evil, at least the sacred relic of Ban Cruach has come home." He yawned. "I am going to bed. Will you come, Thanis, or will you stay and quarrel with our guest?"

"I will stay," she said, "and quarrel."

"Ah, well." Balin sighed puckerishly. "Good night." He vanished into an inner room. Stark looked at Thanis. She had a warm mouth, and her eyes were beautiful, and full of light.

He smiled, holding out his hand.

The night wore on, and Stark lay drowsing. Thanis had opened the curtains. Wind and moonlight swept together into the room, and she stood leaning upon the sill, above the slumbering city. The smile that lingered in the corners of her mouth was sad and far-away, and very tender.

Stark stirred uneasily, making small sounds in his throat. His motions grew violent. Thanis crossed the room and touched him.

Instantly he was awake.

"Animal," she said softly. "You dream."

Stark shook his head. His eyes were still clouded, though not with sleep. "Blood," he said, "heavy in the wind."

"I smell nothing but the dawn," she said, and laughed.

Stark rose. "Get Balin. I'm going up on the Wall."

She did not know him now. "What is it, Stark? What's wrong?"

"Get Balin." Suddenly it seemed that the room stifled him. He caught up his cloak and Camar's belt and flung open the door, standing on the narrow steps outside. The moonlight caught in his eyes, pale as frost-fire.

Thanis shivered. Balin joined her without being called. He, too, had slept but lightly. Together they followed Stark up the rough-cut stair that led to the top of the Wall.

He looked southward, where the plain ran down from the mountains and spread away below Kushat. Nothing moved out

there. Nothing marred the empty whiteness. But Stark said,

"They will attack at dawn."

V

THEY WAITED. SOME DISTANCE away a guard leaned against the parapet, huddled in his cloak. He glanced at them incuriously. It was bitterly cold. The wind came whistling down through the Gates of Death, and below in the streets the watchfires shuddered and flared.

They waited, and still there was nothing. Balin said impatiently, "How can you know they're coming?"

Stark shivered, a shallow rippling of the flesh that had nothing to do with cold, and every muscle of his body came alive. Phobos plunged downward. The moonlight dimmed and changed, and the plain was very empty, very still.

"They will wait for darkness. They will have an hour or so, between moonset and dawn."

Thanis muttered, "Dreams! Besides, I'm cold." She hesitated, and then crept in under Balin's cloak. Stark had gone away from her. She watched him sulkily where he leaned upon the stone. He might have been part of it, as dark and unstirring.

Deimos sank low toward the west.

Stark turned his head, drawn inevitably to look toward the cliffs above Kushat, soaring upward to blot out half the sky. Here, close under them, they seemed to tower outward in a curving mass, like the last wave of eternity rolling down, crested white with the ash of shattered worlds.

I have stood beneath those cliffs before. I have felt them leaning down to crush me, and I have been afraid.

He was still afraid. The mind that had poured its memories into that crystal lens had been dead a million years, but neither time nor death had dulled the terror that beset Ban Cruach in his journey through that nightmare pass.

He looked into the black and narrow mouth of the Gates of Death, cleaving the scarp like a wound, and the primitive ape-thing within him cringed and moaned, oppressed with a sudden sense of fate.

He had come painfully across half a

world, to crouch before the Gates of Death. Some evil magic had let him see forbidden things, had linked his mind in an unholy bond with the long-dead mind of one who had been half a god. These evil miracles had not been for nothing. He would not be allowed to go unscathed.

He drew himself up sharply then, and swore. He had left N'Chaka behind, a naked boy running in a place of rocks and sun on Mercury. He had become Eric John Stark, a man, and civilized. He thrust the senseless premonition from him, and turned his back upon the mountains.

Deimos touched the horizon. A last gleam of reddish light tinged the snow, and then was gone.

Thanis, who was half asleep, said with sudden irritation, "I do not believe in your barbarians. I'm going home." She thrust Balin aside and went away, down the steps.

The plain was now in utter darkness, under the faint, far Northern stars.

Stark settled himself against the parapet. There was a sort of timeless patience about him. Balin envied it. He would have liked to go with Thanis. He was cold and doubtful, but he stayed.

Time passed, endless minutes of it, lengthening into what seemed hours.

Stark said, "Can you hear them?"

"No."

"They come." His hearing, far keener than Balin's, picked up the little sounds, the vast inchoate rustling of an army on the move in stealth and darkness. Light-armed men, hunters, used to stalking wild beasts in the show. They could move softly, very softly.

"I hear nothing," Balin said, and again they waited.

The westering stars moved toward the horizon, and at length in the east a dim pallor crept across the sky.

The plain was still shrouded in night, but now Stark could make out the high towers of the King City of Kushat, ghostly and indistinct—the ancient, proud high towers of the rulers and their nobles, set above the crowded Quarters of merchants and artisans and thieves. He wondered who would be king in Kushat by the time this unrisen sun had set,

"You were wrong," said Balin, peering. "There is nothing on the plain." Stark said, "Wait."

SWIFTLY NOW, in the thin air of Mars, the dawn came with a rush and a leap, flooding the world with harsh light. It flashed in cruel brilliance from sword-blades, from spearheads, from helmets and burnished mail, from the war-harness of beasts, glistened on bare russet heads and coats of leather, set the banners of the clans to burning, crimson and gold and green, bright against the snow.

There was no sound, not a whisper, in all the land.

Somewhere a hunting horn sent forth one deep cry to split the morning. Then burst out the wild skirling of the mountain pipes and the broken thunder of drums, and a wordless scream of exultation that rang back from the Wall of Kushat like the very voice of battle. The men of Mekh began to move.

Raggedly, slowly at first, then more swiftly as the press of warriors broke and flowed, the barbarians swept toward the city as water sweeps over a broken dam.

Knots and clumps of men, tall men running like deer, leaping, shouting, swinging their great brands. Riders, spurring their mounts until they fled belly down. Spears, axes, swordblades tossing, a sea of men and beasts, rushing, trampling, shaking the ground with the thunder of their going.

And ahead of them all came a solitary figure in black mail, riding a raking beast trapped all in black, and bearing a sable axe.

Kushat came to life. There was a swarming and a yelling in the streets, and soldiers began to pour up onto the Wall. A thin company, Stark thought, and shook his head. Mobs of citizens choked the alleys, and every rooftop was full. A troop of nobles went by, brave in their bright mail, to take up their post in the square by the great gate.

Balin said nothing, and Stark did not disturb his thoughts. From the look of him, they were dark indeed.

Soldiers came and ordered them off the the Wall. They went back to their own

roof, where they were joined by Thanis. She was in a high state of excitement, but unafraid.

"Let them attack!" she said. "Let them break their spears against the Wall. They will crawl away again."

Stark began to grow restless. Up in their high emplacements, the big ballistas creaked and thrummed. The muted song of the bows became a wailing hum. Men fell, and were kicked off the ledges by their fellows. The blood-howl of the clans rang unceasing on the frosty air, and Stark heard the rap of scaling ladders against stone.

Thanis said abruptly, "What is that—that sound like thunder?"

"Rams," he answered. "They are battering the gate."

She listened, and Stark saw in her face the beginning of fear.

It was a long fight. Stark watched it hungrily from the roof all that morning. The soldiers of Kushat did bravely and well, but they were as folded sheep against the tall killers of the mountains. By noon the officers were beating the Quarters for men to replace the slain.

Stark and Balin went up again, onto the Wall.

The clans had suffered. Their dead lay in windrows under the Wall, amid the broken ladders. But Stark knew his barbarians. They had sat restless and chafing in the valley for many days, and now the battle-madness was on them and they were not going to be stopped.

Wave after wave of them rolled up, and was cast back, and came on again relentlessly. The intermittent thunder boomed still from the gates, where sweating giants swung the rams under cover of their own bowmen. And everywhere, up and down through the forefront of the fighting, rode the man in black armor, and wild cheering followed him.

Balin said heavily, "It is the end of Kushat."

A LADDER banged against the stones a few feet away. Men swarmed up the rungs, fierce-eyed clansmen with laughter in their mouths. Stark was first at the head.

They had given him a spear. He spitted two men through with it and lost it, and a third man came leaping over the parapet. Stark received him into his arms.

Balin watched. He saw the warrior go crashing back, sweeping his fellows off the ladder. He saw Stark's face. He heard the sounds and smelled the blood and sweat of war, and he was sick to the marrow of his bones, and his hatred of the barbarians was a terrible thing.

Stark caught up a dead man's blade, and within ten minutes his arm was as red as a butcher's. And ever he watched the winged helm that went back and forth below, a standard to the clans.

By mid-afternoon the barbarians had gained the Wall in three places. They spread inward along the ledges, pouring up in a resistless tide, and the defenders broke. The rout became a panic.

"It's all over now," Stark said. "Find Thanis, and hide her."

Balin let fall his sword. "Give me the talisman," he whispered, and Stark saw that he was weeping. "Give it me, and I will go beyond the Gates of Death and rouse Ban Cruach from his sleep. And if he has forgotten Kushat, I will take his power into my own hands. I will fling wide the Gates of Death and loose destruction on the men of Mekh—or if the legends are all lies, then I will die."

He was like a man crazed. "Give me the talisman!"

Stark slapped him, carefully and without heat, across the face. "Get your sister, Balin. Hide her, unless you would be uncle to a red-haired brat."

He went then, like a man who has been stunned. Screaming women with their children clogged the ways that led inward from the Wall, and there was bloody work afoot on the rooftops and in the narrow alleys.

The gate was holding, still.

STARK FORCED his way toward the square. The booths of the hucksters were overthrown, the wine-jars broken and the red wine spilled. Beasts squealed and stamped, tired of their chafing harness, driven wild by the shouting and the smell of blood. The dead were heaped high where

they had fallen from above.

They were all soldiers here, clinging grimly to their last foothold. The deep song of the rams shook the very stones. The iron-sheathed timbers of the gate gave back an answering scream, and toward the end all other sounds grew hushed. The nobles came down slowly from the Wall and mounted, and sat waiting.

There were fewer of them now. Their bright armor was denied and stained, and their faces had a pallor on them.

One last hammer-stroke of the rams.

With a bitter shriek the weakened bolts tore out, and the great gate was broken through.

The nobles of Kushat made their first, and final charge.

As soldiers they went up against the riders of Mekh, and as soldiers they held them until they died. Those that were left were borne back into the square, caught as in the crest of an avalanche. And first through the gates came the winged battle-mask of the Lord Ciaran, and the sable axe that drank men's lives where it hewed.

There was a beast with no rider to claim it, tugging at its headrope. Stark swung onto the saddle pad and cut it free. Where the press was thickest, a welter of struggling brutes and men fighting knee to knee, there was the man in black armor, riding like a god, magnificent, born to war. Stark's eyes shone with a strange, cold light. He struck his heels hard into the scaly flanks. The beast plunged forward.

In and over and through, making the long sword sing. The beast was strong, and frightened beyond fear. It bit and trampled, and Stark cut a path for them, and presently he shouted above the din,

"Ho, there! *Ciaran!*"

The black mask turned toward him, and the remembered voice spoke from behind the barred slot, joyously.

"The wanderer. The wild man!"

Their two mounts shocked together. The axe came down in a whistling curve, and a red swordblade flashed to meet it. Swift, swift, a ringing clash of steel, and the blade was shattered and the axe fallen to the ground.

Stark pressed in.

Ciaran reached for his sword, but his

hand was numbed by the force of that blow and he was slow, a split second. The hilt of Stark's weapon, still clutched in his own numbed grip, fetched him a stunning blow on the helm, so that the metal rang like a flawed bell.

The Lord Ciaran reeled back, only for a moment, but long enough. Stark grasped the war-mask and ripped it off, and got his hands around the naked throat.

He did not break that neck, as he had planned. And the Clansmen who had started in to save their leader stopped and did not move.

Stark knew now why the Lord Ciaran had never shown his face.

The throat he held was white and strong, and his hands around it were buried in a mane of red-gold hair the fell down over the shirt of mail. A red mouth passionate with fury, wonderful curving bone under sculptured flesh, eyes fierce and proud and tameless as the eyes of a young eagle, fire-blue, defying him, hating him . . .

"By the gods," said Stark, very softly. "By the eternal gods!"

VI

A WOMAN! AND IN THAT MOMENT of amazement, she was quicker than he.

There was nothing to warn him, no least flicker of expression. Her two fists came up together between his outstretched arms and caught him under the jaw with a force that nearly snapped his neck. He went over backward, clear out of the saddle, and lay sprawled on the bloody stones, half stunned, the wind knocked out of him.

The woman wheeled her mount. Bending low, she took up the axe from where it had fallen, and faced her warriors, who were as dazed as Stark.

"I have led you well," she said. "I have taken you Kushat. Will any man dispute me?"

They knew the axe, if they did not know her. They looked from side to side uneasily, completely at a loss, and Stark, still gasping on the ground, thought that he had never seen anything as proud and beautiful as she was then in her black

mail, with her bright hair blowing and her glance like blue lightning.

The nobles of Kushat chose that moment to charge. This strange unmasking of the Mekhish lord had given them time to rally, and now they thought that the Gods had wrought a miracle to help them. They found hope, where they had lost everything but courage.

"A wench!" they cried. "A strumpet of the camps. *A woman!*"

They howled it like an epithet, and tore into the barbarians.

She who had been the Lord Ciaran drove the spurs in deep, so that the beast leaped forward screaming. She went, and did not look to see if any had followed, in among the men of Kushat. And the great axe rose and fell, and rose again.

She killed three, and left two others bleeding on the stones, and not once did she look back.

The clansmen found their tongues.

"*Ciaran! Ciaran!*"

The crashing shout drowned out the sound of battle. As one man, they turned and followed her.

Stark, scrambling for his life underfoot, could not forbear smiling. Their child-like minds could see only two alternatives—to slay her out of hand, or to worship her. They had chosen to worship. He thought the bards would be singing of the Lord Ciaran of Mekh as long as there were men to listen.

He managed to take cover behind a wrecked booth, and presently make his way out of the square. They had forgotten him, for the moment. He did not wish to wait, just then, until they—or she—remembered.

She.

He still did not believe it, quite. He touched the bruise under his jaw where she had struck him, and thought of the lithe, swift strength of her, and the way she had ridden alone into battle. He remembered the death of Thord, and how she had kept her red wolves tamed, and he was filled with wonder, and a deep excitement.

He remembered what she had said to him once—*We are of one blood, though we be strangers.*

He laughed, silently, and his eyes were very bright.

The tide of war had rolled on toward the King City, where from the sound of it there was hot fighting around the castle. Eddies of the main struggle swept shrieking through the streets, but the rat-runs under the Wall were clear. Everyone had stampeded inward, the victims with the victors close on their heels. The short northern day was almost gone.

He found a hiding place that offered reasonable safety, and settled himself to wait.

Night came, but he did not move. From the sounds that reached him, the sacking of Kushat was in full swing. They were looting the richer streets first. Their up-raised voices were thick with wine, and mingled with the cries of women. The reflection of many fires tinged the sky.

By midnight the sounds began to slacken, and by the second hour after the city slept, drugged with wine and blood and the weariness of battle. Stark went silently out into the streets, toward the King City.

According to the immemorial pattern of Martian city-states, the castles of the king and the noble families were clustered together in solitary grandeur. Many of the towers were fallen now, the great halls open to the sky. Time had crushed the grandeur that had been Kushat, more fatally than the boots of any conqueror.

In the house of the king, the flamboys guttered low and the chieftains of Mekh slept with their weary pipers among the benches of the banquet hall. In the niches of the tall, carved portal, the guards nodded over their spears. They, too, had fought that day. Even so, Stark did not go near them.

Shivering slightly in the bitter wind, he followed the bulk of the massive walls until he found a postern door, half open as some kitchen knave had left it in his flight. Stark entered, moving like a shadow.

THE PASSAGEWAY was empty, dimly lighted by a single torch. A stairway branched off from it, and he climbed that, picking his way by guess and his memories of similar castles he had seen in the past.

He emerged into a narrow hall, obviously for the use of servants. A tapestry closed the end, stirring in the chill draught that blew along the floor. He peered around it, and saw a massive, vaulted corridor, the stone walls panelled in wood much split and blackened by time, but still showing forth the wonderful carvings of beasts and men, larger than life and overlaid with gold and bright enamel.

From the corridor a single doorway opened—and Otar slept before it, curled on a pallet like a dog.

Stark went back down the narrow hall. He was sure that there must be a back entrance to the king's chambers, and he found the little door he was looking for.

From there on was darkness. He felt his way, stepping with infinite caution, and presently there was a faint gleam of light filtering around the edges of another curtain of heavy tapestry.

He crept toward it, and heard a man's slow breathing on the other side.

He drew the curtain back, a careful inch. The man was sprawled on a bench athwart the door. He slept the honest sleep of exhaustion, his sword in his hand, the stains of his day's work still upon him. He was alone in the small room. A door in the farther wall was closed.

Stark hit him, and caught the sword before it fell. The man grunted once and became utterly relaxed. Stark bound him with his own harness and shoved a gag in his mouth, and went on, through the door in the opposite wall.

The room beyond was large and high and full of shadows. A fire burned low on the hearth, and the uncertain light showed dimly the hangings and the rich stuffs that carpeted the floor, and the dark, sparse shapes of furniture.

Stark made out the lattice-work of a covered bed, let into the wall after the northern fashion.

She was there, sleeping, her red-gold hair the colour of the flames.

He stood a moment, watching her, and then, as though she sensed his presence, she stirred and opened her eyes.

She did not cry out. He had known that she would not. There was no fear in her. She said, with a kind of wry humor, "I

will have a word with my guards about this."

SHE FLUNG ASIDE the covering and rose. She was almost as tall as he, white-skinned and very straight. He noted the long thighs, the narrow loins and magnificent shoulders, the small virginal breasts. She moved as a man moves, without coquetry. A long furred gown, that Stark guessed had lately graced the shoulders of the king, lay over a chair. She put it on.

"Well, wild man?"

"I have come to warn you." He hesitated over her name, and she said,

"My mother named me Ciara, if that seems better to you." She gave him her falcon's glance. "I could have slain you in the square, but now I think you did me a service. The truth would have come out sometime—better then, when they had no time to think about it." She laughed. "They will follow me now, over the edge of the world, if I ask them."

Stark said slowly, "Even beyond the Gates of Death?"

"Certainly, there. Above all, there!"

She turned to one of the tall windows and looked out at the cliffs and the high notch of the pass, touched with greenish silver by the little moons.

"Ban Cruach was a great king. He came out of nowhere to rule the Norlands with a rod of iron, and men speak of him still as half a god. Where did he get his power, if not from beyond the Gates of Death? Why did he go back there at the end of his days, if not to hide away his secret? Why did he build Kushat to guard the pass forever, if not to hoard that power out of reach of all the other nations of Mars?"

"Yes, Stark. My men will follow me. And if they do not, I will go alone."

"You are not Ban Cruach. Nor am I." He took her by the shoulders. "Listen, Ciara. You're already king in the Norlands, and half a legend as you stand. Be content."

"Content!" Her face was close to his, and he saw the blaze of it, the white intensity of ambition and an iron pride. "Are you content?" she asked him. "Have

you ever been content?"

He smiled. "For strangers, we do know each other well. No. But the spurs are not so deep in me."

"The wind and the fire. One spends its strength in wandering, the other devours. But one can help the other. I made you an offer once, and you said you would not bargain unless you could look into my eyes. Look now!"

He did, and his hands upon her shoulders trembled.

"No," he said harshly. "You're a fool, Ciara. Would you be as Otar, mad with what you have seen?"

"Otar is an old man, and likely crazed before he crossed the mountains. Besides—I am not Otar."

Stark said somberly, "Even the bravest may break. Ban Cruach himself . . ."

She must have seen the shadow of that horror in his eyes, for he felt her body tense.

"What of Ban Cruach? What do you know, Stark? Tell me!"

He was silent, and she went from him angrily.

"You have the talisman," she said. "That I am sure of. And if need be, I will flay you alive to get it!" She faced him across the room. "But whether I get it or not, I will go through the Gates of Death. I must wait, now, until after the thaw. The warm wind will blow soon, and the gorges will be running full. But afterward, I will go, and no talk of fears and demons will stop me."

She began to pace the room with long strides, and the full skirts of the gown made a subtle whispering about her.

"You do not know," she said, in a low and bitter voice. "I was a girl-child, without a name. By the time I could walk, I was a servant in the house of my grandfather. The two things that kept me living were pride and hate. I left my scrubbing of floors to practice arms with the young boys. I was beaten for it every day, but every day I went. I knew even then that only force would free me. And my father was a king's son, a good man of his hands. His blood was strong in me. I learned."

She held her head very high. She had earned the right to hold it so. She finished

quietly,

"I have come a long way. I will not turn back now."

"Ciara." Stark came and stood before her. "I am talking to you as a fighting man, an equal. There may be power behind the Gates of Death, I do not know. But this I have seen—madness, horror, an evil that is beyond our understanding.

"I think you will not accuse me of cowardice. And yet I would not go into that pass for all the power of all the kings of Mars!"

Once started, he could not stop. The full force of that dark vision of the talisman swept over him again in memory. He came closer to her, driven by the need to make her understand.

"Yes, I have the talisman! And I have had a taste of its purpose. I think Ban Cruach left it as a warning, so that none would follow him. I have seen the temples and the palaces glitter in the ice. I have seen the Gates of Death—*not with my own eyes, Ciara, but with his. With the eyes and the memories of Ban Cruach!*"

He had caught her again, his hands strong on her strong arms.

"Will you believe me, or must you see for yourself—the dreadful things that walk those buried streets, the shapes that rise from nowhere in the mists of the pass?"

Her gaze burned into his. Her breath was hot and sweet upon his lips, and she was like a sword between his hands, shining and unafraid.

"Give me the talisman. Let me see!"

He answered furiously, "You are mad. As mad as Otar." And he kissed her, in a rage, in a panic lest all that beauty be destroyed—a kiss as brutal as a blow, that left him shaken.

SHE BACKED AWAY slowly, one step, and he thought she would have killed him. He said heavily:

"If you will see, you will. The thing is here."

He opened the boss and laid the crystal in her outstretched hand. He did not meet her eyes.

"Sit down. Hold the flat side against your brow."

She sat, in a great chair of carved wood. Stark noticed that her hand was unsteady, her face the colour of white ash. He was glad she did not have the axe where she could reach it. She did not play at anger.

For a long moment she studied the intricate lens, the incredible depository of a man's mind. Then she raised it slowly to her forehead.

He saw her grow rigid in the chair. How long he watched beside her he never knew. Seconds, an eternity. He saw her eyes turn blank and strange, and a shadow came into her face, changing it subtly, altering the lines, so that it seemed almost a stranger was peering through her flesh.

All at once, in a voice that was not her own, she cried out terribly, "*Oh gods of Mars!*"

The talisman dropped rolling to the floor, and Ciara fell forward into Stark's arms.

He thought at first that she was dead. He carried her to the bed, in an agony of fear that surprised him with its violence, and laid her down, and put his hand over her heart.

It was beating strongly. Relief that was almost a sickness swept over him. He turned, searching vaguely for wine, and saw the talisman. He picked it up and put it back inside the boss. A jewelled flagon stood on a table across the room. He took it and started back, and then, abruptly, there was a wild clamor in the hall outside and Otar was shouting Ciara's name, pounding on the door.

It was not barred. In another moment they would burst through, and he knew that they would not stop to enquire what he was doing there.

He dropped the flagon and went out swiftly, the way he had come. The guard was still unconscious. In the narrow hall beyond, Stark hesitated. A woman's voice was rising high above the tumult in the main corridor, and he thought he recognized it.

He went to the tapestry curtain and looked for the second time around its edge.

The lofty space was full of men, newly awakened from their heavy sleep and as nervous as so many bears. Thanis struggled in the grip of two of them. Her scar-

let kirtle was torn, her hair flying in wild elf-locks, and her face was the face of a mad thing. The whole story of the doom of Kushat was written large upon it.

She screamed again and again, and would not be silenced.

"Tell her, the witch that leads you! Tell her that she is already doomed to death, with all her army!"

Otar opened up the door of Ciara's room.

Thanis surged forward. She must have fled through all that castle before she was caught, and Stark's heart ached for her.

"You!" she shrieked through the doorway, and poured out all the filth of the quarter upon Ciara's name. "Balin has gone to bring doom upon you! He will open wide the Gates of Death, and then you will die!—die!—die!"

Stark felt the shock of a terrible dread, as he let the curtain fall. Mad with hatred against conquerors, Balin had fulfilled his raging promise and had gone to fling open the Gates of Death.

Remembering his nightmare vision of the shining, evil ones whom Ban Cruach had long ago prisoned beyond those gates, Stark felt a sickness grow within him as he went down the stair and out the postern door.

It was almost dawn. He looked up at the brooding cliffs, and it seemed to him that the wind in the pass had a sound of laughter that mocked his growing dread.

He knew what he must do, if an ancient, mysterious horror was not to be released upon Kushat.

I may still catch Balin before he has gone too far! If I don't—

He dared not think of that. He began to walk very swiftly through the night streets, toward the distant, towering Gates of Death.

VII

IT WAS PAST NOON. HE HAD climbed high toward the saddle of the pass. Kushat lay small below him, and he could see now the pattern of the gorges, cut ages deep in the living rock, that carried the spring torrents of the watershed around the mighty ledge on which the city was built.

The pass itself was channeled, but only by its own snows and melting ice. It was too high for a watercourse. Nevertheless, Stark thought, a man might find it hard to stay alive if he were caught there by the thaw.

He had seen nothing of Balin. The gods knew how many hours' start he had. Stark imagined him, scrambling wild-eyed over the rocks, driven by the same madness that had sent Thanis up into the castle to call down destruction on Ciara's head.

The sun was brilliant but without warmth. Stark shivered, and the icy wind blew strong. The cliffs hung over him, vast and sheer and crushing, and the narrow mouth of the pass was before him. He would go no farther. He would turn back, now.

But he did not. He began to walk forward, into the Gates of Death.

The light was dim and strange at the bottom of that cleft. Little veils of mist crept and clung between the ice and the rock, thickened, became more dense as he went farther and farther into the pass. He could not see, and the wind spoke with many tongues, piping in the crevices of the cliffs.

The steps of the Earthman slowed and faltered. He had known fear in his life before. But now he was carrying the burden of two men's terrors—Ban Cruach's, and his own.

He stopped, enveloped in the clinging mist. He tried to reason with himself—that Ban Cruach's fears had died a million years ago, that Otar had come this way and lived, and Balin had come also.

But the thin veneer of civilization sloughed away and left him with the naked bones of truth. His nostrils twitched to the smell of evil, the subtle unclean taint that only a beast, or one as close to it as he, can sense and know. Every nerve was a point of pain, raw with apprehension. An overpowering recognition of danger, hidden somewhere, mocking at him, made his very body change, draw in upon itself and flatten forward, so that when at last he went on again he was more like a four-footed thing than a man walking upright.

Infinitely wary, silent, moving surely over the ice and the tumbled rock, he fol-

lowed Balin. He had ceased to think. He was going now on sheer instinct.

The pass led on and on. It grew darker, and in the dim uncanny twilight there were looming shapes that menaced him, and ghostly wings that brushed him, and a terrible stillness that was not broken by the eerie voices of the wind.

Rock and mist and ice. Nothing that moved or lived. And yet the sense of danger deepened, and when he paused the beating of his heart was like thunder in his ears.

Once, far away, he thought he heard the echoes of a man's voice crying, but he had no sight of Balin.

The pass began to drop, and the twilight deepened into a kind of sickly night.

On and down, more slowly now, crouching, slinking, heavily oppressed, tempted to snarl at boulders and tear at wraiths of fog. He had no idea of the miles he had travelled. But the ice was thicker now, the cold intense.

The rock walls broke off sharply. The mist thinned. The pallid darkness lifted to a clear twilight. He came to the end of the Gates of Death.

Stark stopped. Ahead of him, almost blocking the end of the pass, something dark and high and massive loomed in the thinning mists.

It was a great cairn, and upon it sat a figure, facing outward from the Gates of Death as though it kept watch over whatever country lay beyond.

The figure of a man in antique Martian armor.

After a moment, Stark crept toward the cairn. He was still almost all savage, torn between fear and fascination.

He was forced to scramble over the lower rocks of the cairn itself. Quite suddenly he felt a hard shock, and a flashing sensation of warmth that was somehow inside his own flesh, and not in any tempering of the frozen air. He gave a startled leap forward, and whirled, looking up into the face of the mailed figure with the confused idea that it had reached down and struck him.

It had not moved, of course. And Stark knew, with no need of anyone to tell him, that he looked into the face of Ban Cruach.

IT WAS A FACE made for battles and for ruling, the bony ridges harsh and strong, the hollows under them worn deep with years. Those eyes, dark shadows under the rusty helm, had dreamed high dreams, and neither age nor death had conquered them.

And even in death, Ban Cruach was not unarmed.

Clad as for battle in his ancient mail, he held upright between his hands a mighty sword. The pommel was a ball of crystal large as a man's fist, that held within it a spark of intense brilliance. The little, blinding flame throbbed with its own force, and the sword-blade blazed with a white, cruel radiance.

Ban Cruach, dead but frozen to eternal changelessness by the bitter cold, sitting here upon his cairn for a million years and warding forever the inner end of the Gates of Death, as his ancient city of Kushat warded the outer.

Stark took two cautious steps closer to Ban Cruach, and felt again the shock and the flaring heat in his blood. He recoiled, satisfied.

The strange force in the blazing sword made an invisible barrier across the mouth of the pass, protected Ban Cruach himself. A barrier of short waves, he thought, of the type used in deep therapy, having no heat in themselves but increasing the heat in body cells by increasing their vibration. But these waves were stronger than any he had known before.

A barrier, a wall of force, closing the inner end of the Gates of Death. A barrier that was not designed against man.

Stark shivered. He turned from the sombre, brooding form of Ban Cruach and his eyes followed the gaze of the dead king, out beyond the cairn.

He looked across this forbidden land within the Gates of Death.

At his back was the mountain barrier. Before him, a handful of miles to the north, the terminus of the polar cap rose like a cliff of bluish crystal soaring up to touch the early stars. Locked in between those two titanic walls was a great valley of ice.

White and glimmering that valley was, and very still, and very beautiful, the

ice shaped gracefully into curving domes and hollows. And in the center of it stood a dark tower of stone, a cyclopean bulk that Stark knew must go down an unguessable distance to its base on the bed-rock. It was like the tower in which Camar had died. But this one was not a broken ruin. It loomed with alien arrogance, and within its bulk pallid lights flickered eerily, and it was crowned by a cloud of shimmering darkness.

It was like the tower of his dread vision, the tower that he had seen, not as Eric John Stark, but as Ban Cruach!

Stark's gaze dropped slowly from the evil tower to the curving ice of the valley. And the fear within him grew beyond all bounds.

He had seen that, too, in his vision. The glimmering ice, the domes and hollows of it. He had looked down through it at the city that lay beneath, and he had seen those who came and went in the buried streets.

Stark hunkered down. For a long while he did not stir.

He did not want to go out there. He did not want to go out from the grim, warning figure of Ban Cruach with his blazing sword, into that silent valley. He was afraid, afraid of what he might see if he went there and looked down through the ice, afraid of the final dread fulfillment of his vision.

But he had come after Balin, and Balin must be out there somewhere. He did not want to go, but he was himself, and he must.

HE WENT, going very softly, out toward the tower of stone. And there was no sound in all that land.

The last of the twilight had faded. The ice gleamed, faintly luminous under the stars, and there was light beneath it, a soft radiance that filled all the valley with the glow of a buried moon.

Stark tried to keep his eyes upon the tower. He did not wish to look down at what lay under his stealthy feet.

Inevitably, he looked.

The temples and the palaces glittering in the ice . . .

7—Planet—March

Level upon level, going down. Wells of soft light spanned with soaring bridges, slender spires rising, an endless variation of streets and crystal walls exquisitely patterned, above and below and overlapping, so that it was like looking down through a thousand giant snowflakes. A metropolis of gossamer and frost, fragile and lovely as a dream, locked in the clear, pure vault of the ice.

Stark saw the people of the city passing along the bright streets, their outlines blurred by the icy vault as things are half obscured by water. The creatures of vision, vaguely shining, infinitely evil.

He shut his eyes and waited until the shock and the dizziness left him. Then he set his gaze resolutely on the tower, and crept on, over the glassy sky that covered those buried streets.

Silence. Even the wind was hushed.

He had gone perhaps half the distance when the cry rang out.

It burst upon the valley with a shocking violence. "Stark! Stark!" The ice rang with it, curving ridges picked up his name and flung it back and forth with eerie crystal voices, and the echoes fled out whispering *Stark! Stark!* until it seemed that the very mountains spoke.

Stark whirled about. In the pallid gloom between the ice and the stars there was light enough to see the cairn behind him, and the dim figure atop it with the shining sword.

Light enough to see Ciara, and the dark knot of riders who had followed her through the Gates of Death.

She cried his name again. "Come back! Come back!"

The ice of the valley answered mockingly, "*Come back! Come back!*" and Stark was gripped with a terror that held him motionless.

She should not have called him. She should not have made a sound in that deathly place.

A man's hoarse scream rose above the flying echoes. The riders turned and fled suddenly, the squealing, hissing beasts crowding each other, floundering wildly on the rocks of the cairn, stampeding back into the pass.

Ciara was left alone. Stark saw her

fight the rearing beast she rode and then fling herself out of the saddle and let it go. She came toward him, running, clad all in her black armor, the great axe swinging high.

"Behind you, Stark! Oh, gods of Mars!"

He turned then and saw them, coming out from the tower of stone, the pale, shining creatures that move so swiftly across the ice, so fleet and swift that no man living could outrun them.

HE SHOUTED to Ciara to turn back. He drew his sword and over his shoulder he cursed her in a black fury because he could hear her mailed feet coming on behind him.

The gliding creatures, sleek and slender, reedlike, bending, delicate as wraiths, their bodies shaped from northern rainbows of amethyst and rose—if they should touch Ciara, if their loathsome hands should touch her . . .

Stark let out one raging catlike scream, and rushed them.

The opalescent bodies slipped away beyond his reach. The creatures watched him.

They had no faces, but they watched. They were eyeless but not blind, earless, but not without hearing. The inquisitive tendrils that formed their sensory organs stirred and shifted like the petals of ungodly flowers, and the color of them was the white frost-fire that dances on the snow.

"Go back, Ciara!"

But she would not go, and he knew that they would not have let her. She reached him, and they set their backs together. The shining ones ringed them round, many feet away across the ice, and watched the long sword and the great hungry axe, and there was something in the lissome swaying of their bodies that suggested laughter.

"You fool," said Stark. "You bloody fool."

"And you?" answered Ciara. "Oh, yes, I know about Balin. That mad girl, screaming in the palace—she told me, and you were seen from the wall, climbing to the Gates of Death. I tried to catch you."

"Why?"

She did not answer that. "They won't

fight us, Stark. Do you think we could make it back to the cairn?"

"No. But we can try."

Guarding each others' backs, they began to walk toward Ban Cruach and the pass. If they could once reach the barrier, they would be safe.

Stark knew now what Ban Cruach's wall of force was built against. And he began to guess the riddle of the Gates of Death.

The shining ones glided with them, out of reach. They did not try to bar the way. They formed a circle around the man and woman, moving with them and around them at the same time, an endless weaving chain of many bodies shining with soft jewel tones of color.

They drew closer and closer to the cairn, to the brooding figure of Ban Cruach and his sword. It crossed Stark's mind that the creatures were playing with him and Ciara. Yet they had no weapons. Almost, he began to hope . . .

From the tower where the shimmering cloud of darkness clung came a black crescent of force that swept across the ice-field like a sickle and gathered the two humans in.

Stark felt a shock of numbing cold that turned his nerves to ice. His sword dropped from his hand, and he heard Ciara's axe go down. His body was without strength, without feeling, dead.

He fell, and the shining ones glided in toward him.

VIII

TWICE BEFORE IN HIS LIFE Stark had come near to freezing. It had been like this, the numbness and the cold. And yet it seemed that the dark force had struck rather at his nerve centers than at his flesh.

He could not see Ciara, who was behind him, but he heard the metallic clashing of her mail and one small, whispered cry, and he knew that she had fallen, too.

The glowing creatures surrounded him. He saw their bodies bending over him, the frosty tendrils of their faces writhing as though in excitement or delight.

Their hands touched him. Little hands with seven fingers, deft and frail. Even

his numbed flesh felt the terrible cold of their touch, freezing as outer space. He yelled, or tried to, but they were not abashed.

They lifted him and bore him toward the tower, a company of them, bearing his heavy weight upon their gleaming shoulders.

He saw the tower loom high and higher still above him. The cloud of dark force that crowned it blotted out the stars. It became too huge and high to see at all, and then there was a low flat arch of stone close above his face, and he was inside.

Straight overhead—a hundred feet, two hundred, he could not tell—was a globe of crystal, fitted into the top of the tower as a jewel is held in a setting.

The air around it was shadowed with the same eerie gloom that hovered outside, but less dense, so that Stark could see the smouldering purple spark that burned within the globe, sending out its dark vibrations.

A globe of crystal, with a heart of sullen flame. Stark remembered the sword of Ban Cruach, and the white fire that burned in its hilt.

Two globes, the bright-cored and the dark. The sword of Ban Cruach touched the blood with heat. The globe of the tower deadened the flesh with cold. It was the same force, but at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Stark saw the cryptic controls of that glooming globe—a bank of them, on a wide stone ledge just inside the tower, close beside him. There were shining ones on that ledge tending those controls, and there were other strange and massive mechanisms there too.

Flying spirals of ice climbed up inside the tower, spanning the great stone well with spidery bridges, joining icy galleries. In some of those galleries, Stark vaguely glimpsed rigid, gleaming figures like statues of ice, but he could not see them clearly as he was carried on.

He was being carried downward. He passed slits in the wall, and knew that the pallid lights he had seen through them were the moving bodies of the creatures as they went up and down these high-

flung, icy bridges. He managed to turn his head to look down, and saw what was beneath him.

The well of the tower plunged down a good five hundred feet to bedrock, widening as it went. The web of ice-bridges and the spiral ways went down as well as up, and the creatures that carried him were moving smoothly along a transparent ribbon of ice no more than a yard in width, suspended over that terrible drop.

Stark was glad that he could not move just then. One instinctive start of horror would have thrown him and his bearers to the rock below, and would have carried Ciara with them.

Down and down, gliding in utter silence along the descending spiral ribbon. The great glooming crystal grew remote above him. Ice was solid now in the slots of the walls. He wondered if they had brought Balin this way.

There were other openings, wide arches like the one they had brought their captives through, and these gave Stark brief glimpses of broad avenues and unguessable buildings, shaped from the pellucid ice and flooded with the soft radiance that was like eerie moonlight.

At length, on what Stark took to be the third level of the city, the creatures bore him through one of these archways, into the streets beyond.

BELOW HIM NOW was the translucent thickness of ice that formed the floor of this level and the roof of the level beneath. He could see the blurred tops of delicate minarets, the clustering roofs that shone like chips of diamond.

Above him was an ice roof. Elfín spires rose toward it, delicate as needles. Lacy battlements and little domes, buildings star-shaped, wheel-shaped, the fantastic, lovely shapes of snow-crystals, frosted over with a sparkling foam of light.

The people of the city gathered along the way to watch, a living, shifting rainbow of amethyst and rose and green, against the pure blue-white. And there was no least whisper of sound anywhere.

For some distance they went through a geometric maze of streets. And then there was a cathedral-like building all arched and

spired, standing in the center of a twelve-pointed plaza. Here they turned, and bore their captives in.

Stark saw a vaulted roof, very slim and high, etched with a glittering tracery that might have been carving of an alien sort, delicate as the weavings of spiders. The feet of his bearers were silent on the icy paving.

At the far end of the long vault sat seven of the shining ones in high seats marvellously shaped from the ice. And before them, grey-faced, shuddering with cold and not noticing it, drugged with a sick horror, stood Balin. He looked around once, and did not speak.

Stark was set on his feet, with Ciara beside him. He saw her face, and it was terrible to see the fear in her eyes, that had never shown fear before.

He himself was learning why men went mad beyond the Gates of Death.

Chill, dreadful fingers touched him expertly. A flash of pain drove down his spine, and he could stand again.

The seven who sat in the high seats were motionless, their bright tendrils stirring with infinite delicacy as though they studied the three humans who stood before them.

Stark thought he could feel a cold, soft fingering of his brain. It came to him that these creatures were probably telepaths. They lacked organs of speech, and yet they must have some efficient means of communications. Telepathy was not uncommon among the many races of the Solar System, and Stark had had experience with it before.

He forced his mind to relax. The alien impulse was instantly stronger. He sent out his own questing thought and felt it brush the edges of a consciousness so utterly foreign to his own that he knew he could never probe it, even had he had the skill.

He learned one thing—that the shining faceless ones looked upon him with equal horror and loathing. They recoiled from the unnatural human features, and most of all, most strongly, they abhorred the warmth of human flesh. Even the infinitesimal amount of heat radiated by their half-frozen human bodies caused the ice-folk

discomfort.

Stark marshalled his imperfect abilities and projected a mental question to the seven.

"What do you want of us?"

The answer came back, faint and imperfect, as though the gap between their alien minds was almost too great to bridge. And the answer was one word.

"Freedom!"

Balin spoke suddenly. He voiced only a whisper, and yet the sound was shockingly loud in that crystal vault.

"They have asked me already. Tell them no, Stark! Tell them no!"

He looked at Ciara then, a look of murderous hatred. "If you turn them loose upon Kushat, I will kill you with my own hands before I die."

Stark spoke again, silently, to the seven. "I do not understand."

A GAIN the struggling, difficult thought. "We are the old race, the kings of the glacial ice. Once we held all the land beyond the mountains, outside the pass you call the Gates of Death."

Stark had seen the ruins of the towers out on the moors. He knew how far their kingdom had extended.

"We controlled the ice, far outside the polar cap. Our towers blanketed the land with the dark force drawn from Mars itself, from the magnetic field of the planet. That radiation bars out heat, from the Sun, and even from the awful winds that blow warm from the south. So there was never any thaw. Our cities were many, and our race was great.

"Then came Ban Cruach, from the south . . .

"He waged a war against us. He learned the secret of the crystal globes, and learned how to reverse their force and use it against us. He, leading his army, destroyed our towers one by one, and drove us back . . .

"Mars needed water. The outer ice was melted, our lovely cities crumbled to nothing, so that creatures like Ban Cruach might have water! And our people died.

"We retreated at the last, to this our ancient polar citadel behind the Gates of Death. Even here, Ban Cruach followed.

He destroyed even this tower once, at the time of the thaw. But this city is founded in polar ice—and only the upper levels were harmed. Even Ban Cruach could not touch the heart of the eternal polar cap of Mars!

"When he saw that he could not destroy us utterly, he set himself in death to guard the Gates of Death with his blazing sword, that we might never again reclaim our ancient dominion.

"That is what we mean when we ask for freedom. We ask that you take away the sword of Ban Cruach, so that we may once again go out through the Gates of Death!"

Stark cried aloud, hoarsely, "No!"

He knew the barren deserts of the south, the wastes of red dust, the dead sea bottoms—the terrible thirst of Mars, growing greater with every year of the million that had passed since Ban Cruach locked the Gates of Death.

He knew the canals, the pitiful waterways that were all that stood between the people of Mars and extinction. He remembered the yearly release from death when the spring thaw brought the water rushing down from the north.

He thought of these cold creatures going forth, building again their great towers of stone, sheathing half a world in ice that would never melt. He thought of the people of Jekkara and Valkis and Barrakesh, of the countless cities of the south, watching for the flood that did not come, and falling at last to mingle their bodies with the blowing dust.

He said again, "No. Never."

The distant thought-voice of the seven spoke, and this time the question was addressed to Ciara.

Stark saw her face. She did not know the Mars he knew, but she had memories of her own—the mountain-valleys of Mekh, the moors, the snowy gorges. She looked at the shining ones in their high seats, and said,

"If I take that sword, it will be to use it against you as Ban Cruach did!"

Stark knew that the seven had understood the thought behind her words. He felt that they were amused.

"The secret of that sword was lost a million years ago, the day Ban Cruach

died. Neither you nor anyone now knows how to use it as he did. But the sword's radiations of warmth still lock us here.

"We cannot approach that sword, for its vibrations of heat slay us if we do. But you warm-bodied ones can approach it. And you will do so, and take it from its place. *One of you will take it!*"

They were very sure of that.

"We can see, a little way, into your evil minds. Much we do not understand. But—the mind of the large man is full of the woman's image, and the mind of the woman turns to him. Also, there is a link between the large man and the small man, less strong, but strong enough."

The thought-voice of the seven finished, "The large man will take away the sword for us because he must—to save the other two."

Ciara turned to Stark. "They cannot force you, Stark. Don't let them. No matter what they do to me, don't let them!"

Balin stared at her with a certain wonder. "You would die, to protect Kushat?"

"Not Kushat alone, though its people too are human," she said, almost angrily. "There are my red wolves—a wild pack, but my own. And others." She looked at Balin. "What do *you* say? Your life against the Norlands?"

Balin made an effort to lift his head as high as hers, and the red jewel flashed in his ear. He was a man crushed by the falling of his world, and terrified by what his mad passion had led him into, here beyond the Gates of Death. But he was not afraid to die.

He said so, and even Ciara knew that he spoke the truth.

But the seven were not dismayed. Stark knew that when their thought-voice whispered in his mind,

"It is not death alone you humans have to fear, but the manner of your dying. You shall see that, before you choose."

SWIFTLY, SILENTLY, those of the ice-folk who had borne the captives into the city came up from behind, where they had stood withdrawn and waiting. And one of them bore a crystal rod like a sceptre, with a spark of ugly purple burning in the globed end.

Stark leaped to put himself between them and Ciara. He struck out, raging, and because he was almost as quick as they, he caught one of the slim luminous bodies between his hands.

The utter coldness of that alien flesh burned his hands as frost will burn. Even so, he clung on, snarling, and saw the tendrils writhe and stiffen as though in pain.

Then, from the crystal rod, a thread of darkness spun itself to touch his brain with silence, and the cold that lies between the worlds.

He had no memory of being carried once more through the shimmering streets of that elfin, evil city, back to the stupendous well of the tower, and up along the spiral path of ice that soared those dizzy hundreds of feet from bedrock to the glooming crystal globe. But when he again opened his eyes, he was lying on the wide stone ledge at ice-level.

Beside him was the arch that led outside. Close above his head was the control bank that he had seen before.

Ciara and Balin were there also, on the ledge. They leaned stiffly against the stone wall beside the control bank, and facing them was a squat, round mechanism from which projected a sort of wheel of crystal rods.

Their bodies were strangely rigid, but their eyes and minds were awake. Terribly awake. Stark saw their eyes, and his heart turned within him.

Ciara looked at him. She could not speak, but she had no need to. *No matter what they do to me . . .*

She had not feared the swordsmen of Kushat. She had not feared her red wolves, when he unmasked her in the square. She was afraid now. But she warned him, ordered him not to save her.

They cannot force you. Stark! Don't let them.

And Balin, too, pleaded with him for Kushat.

They were not alone on the ledge. The ice-folk clustered there, and out upon the flying spiral pathway, on the narrow bridges and the spans of fragile ice, they stood in hundreds watching, eyeless, faceless, their bodies drawn in rainbow lines across the dimness of the shaft.

Stark's mind could hear the silent edges of their laughter. Secret, knowing laughter, full of evil, full of triumph, and Stark was filled with a corroding terror.

He tried to move, to crawl toward Ciara standing like a carved image in her black mail. He could not.

Again her fierce, proud glance met his. And the silent laughter of the ice-folk echoed in his mind, and he thought it very strange that in this moment, now, he should realize that there had never been another woman like her on all of the worlds of the Sun.

The fear she felt was not for herself. It was for him.

Apart from the multitudes of the ice-folk, the group of seven stood upon the ledge. And now their thought-voice spoke to Stark, saying,

"Look about you. Behold the men who have come before you through the Gates of Death!"

Stark raised his eyes to where their slender fingers pointed, and saw the icy galleries around the tower, saw more clearly the icy statues in them that he had only glimpsed before.

MEN, set like images in the galleries. Men whose bodies were sheathed in a glittering mail of ice, sealing them forever. Warriors, nobles, fanatics and thieves—the wanderers of a million years who had dared to enter this forbidden valley, and had remained forever.

He saw their faces, their tortured eyes wide open, their features frozen in the agony of a slow and awful death.

"They refused us," the seven whispered. "They would not take away the sword. And so they died, as this woman and this man will die, unless you choose to save them."

"We will show you, human, how they died!"

One of the ice-folk bent and touched the squat, round mechanism that faced Balin and Ciara. Another shifted the pattern of control on the master-bank.

The wheel of crystal rods on that squat mechanism began to turn. The rods blurred, became a disc that spun faster and faster.

High above in the top of the tower the

great globe brooded, shrouded in its cloud of shimmering darkness. The disc became a whirling blur. The glooming shadow of the globe deepened, coalesced. It began to lengthen and descend, stretching itself down toward the spinning disc.

The crystal rods of the mechanism drank the shadow in. And out of that spinning blur there came a subtle weaving of threads of darkness, a gossamer curtain winding around Ciara and Balin so that their outlines grew ghostly and the pallor of their flesh was as the pallor of snow at night.

And still Stark could not move.

The veil of darkness began to sparkle faintly. Stark watched it, watched the chill motes brighten, watched the tracery of frost whiten over Ciara's mail, touch Balin's dark hair with silver.

Frost. Bright, sparkling, beautiful, a halo of frost around their bodies. A dust of splintered diamond across their faces, an aureole of brittle light to crown their heads.

Frost. Flesh slowly hardening in marbly whiteness, as the cold slowly increased. And yet their eyes still lived, and saw, and understood.

The thought-voice of the seven spoke again.

"You have only minutes now to decide! Their bodies cannot endure too much, and live again. Behold their eyes, and how they suffer!

"Only minutes, human! Take away the sword of Ban Cruach! Open for us the Gates of Death, and we will release these two, alive."

Stark felt again the flashing stab of pain along his nerves, as one of the shining creatures moved behind him. Life and feeling came back into his limbs.

He struggled to his feet. The hundreds of the ice-folk on the bridges and galleries watched him in an eager silence.

He did not look at them. His eyes were on Ciara's. And now, her eyes pleaded.

"Don't, Stark! Don't barter the life of the Norlands for me!"

The thought-voice beat at Stark, cutting into his mind with cruel urgency.

"Hurry, human! They are already beginning to die. Take away the sword, and let them live!"

Stark turned. He cried out, in a voice that made the icy bridges tremble:

"I will take the sword!"

He staggered out, then. Out through the archway, across the ice, toward the distant cairn that blocked the Gates of Death.

IX

ACROSS THE GLOWING ICE OF the valley Stark went at a stumbling run that grew swifter and more sure as his cold-numbered body began to regain its functions. And behind him, pouring out of the tower to watch, came the shining ones.

They followed after him, gliding lightly. He could sense their excitement, the cold, strange ecstasy of triumph. He knew that already they were thinking of the great towers of stone rising again above the Norlands, the crystal cities still and beautiful under the ice, all vestige of the ugly citadels of man gone and forgotten.

The seven spoke once more, a warning.

"If you turn toward us with the sword, the woman and the man will die. And you will die as well. For neither you nor any other can now use the sword as a weapon of offense."

Stark ran on. He was thinking then only of Ciara, with the frost-crystals gleaming on her marble flesh and her eyes full of mute torment.

The cairn loomed up ahead, dark and high. It seemed to Stark that the brooding figure of Ban Cruach watched him coming with those shadowed eyes beneath the rusty helm. The great sword blazed between those dead, frozen hands.

The ice-folk had slowed their forward rush. They stopped and waited, well back from the cairn.

Stark reached the edge of tumbled rock. He felt the first warm flare of the force-waves in his blood, and slowly the chill began to creep out from his bones. He climbed, scrambling upward over the rough stones of the cairn.

Abruptly, then, at Ban Cruach's feet, he slipped and fell. For a second it seemed that he could not move.

His back was turned toward the ice-folk. His body was bent forward, and shielded so, his hands worked with fever-

ish speed.

From his cloak he tore a strip of cloth. From the iron boss he took the glittering lens, the talisman of Ban Cruach. Stark laid the lens against his brow, and bound it on.

The remembered shock, the flood and sweep of memories that were not his own. The mind of Ban Cruach thundering its warning, its hard-won knowledge of an ancient, epic war . . .

He opened his own mind wide to receive those memories. Before he had fought against them. Now he knew that they were his one small chance in this swift gamble with death. Two things only of his own he kept firm in that staggering tide of another man's memories. Two names—Ciara and Balin.

He rose up again. And now his face had a strange look, a curious duality. The features had not changed, but somehow the lines of the flesh had altered subtly, so that it was almost as though the old unconquerable king himself had risen again in battle.

He mounted the last step or two and stood before Ban Cruach. A shudder ran through him, a sort of gathering and settling of the flesh, as though Stark's being had accepted the stranger within it. His eyes, cold and pale as the very ice that sheathed the valley, burned with a cruel light.

He reached and took the sword, out of the frozen hands of Ban Cruach.

As though it were his own, he knew the secret of the metal rings that bound its hilt, below the ball of crystal. The savage throb of the invisible radiation beat in his quickening flesh. He was warm again, his blood running swiftly, his muscles sure and strong. He touched the rings and turned them.

The fan-shaped aura of force that had closed the Gates of Death narrowed in, and as it narrowed it leaped up from the blade of the sword in a tongue of pale fire, faintly shimmering, made visible now by the full focus of its strength.

Stark felt the wave of horror bursting from the minds of the ice-folk as they perceived what he had done. And he laughed.

His bitter laughter rang harsh across the valley as he turned to face them, and he heard in his brain the shuddering, silent shriek that went up from all that gathered company . . .

"Ban Cruach! Ban Cruach has returned!"

They had touched his mind. They knew.

HE LAUGHED AGAIN, and swept the sword in a flashing arc, and watched the long bright blade of force strike out more terrible than steel, against the rainbow bodies of the shining ones.

They fell. Like flowers under a scythe they fell, and all across the ice the ones who were yet untouched turned about in their hundreds and fled back toward the tower.

Stark came leaping down the cairn, the talisman of Ban Cruach bound upon his brow, the sword of Ban Cruach blazing in his hand.

He swung that awful blade as he ran. The force-beam that sprang from it cut through the press of creatures fleeing before him, hampered by their own numbers as they crowded back through the archway.

He had only a few short seconds to do what he had to do.

Rushing with great strides across the ice, spurning the withered bodies of the dead . . . And then, from the glooming darkness that hovered around the tower of stone, the black cold beam struck down.

Like a coiling whip it lashed him. The deadly numbness invaded the cells of his flesh, ached in the marrow of his bones. The bright force of the sword battled the chill invaders, and a corrosive agony tore at Stark's inner body where the antipathetic radiations waged war.

His steps faltered. He gave one hoarse cry of pain, and then his limbs failed and he went heavily to his knees.

Instinct only made him cling to the sword. Waves of blinding anguish racked him. The coiling lash of darkness encircled him, and its touch was the abysmal cold of outer space, striking deep into his heart.

Hold the sword close, hold it closer, like a shield. The pain is great, but I will not die unless I drop the sword,

Ban Cruach the mighty had fought this fight before.

Stark raised the sword again, close against his body. The fierce pulse of its brightness drove back the cold. Not far, for the freezing touch was very strong. But far enough so that he could rise again and stagger on.

The dark force of the tower writhed and licked about him. He could not escape it. He slashed it in a blind fury with the blazing sword, and where the forces met a flicker of lightning leaped in the air, but it would not be beaten back.

He screamed at it, a raging cat-cry that was all Stark, all primitive fury at the necessity of pain. And he forced himself to run, to drag his tortured body faster across the ice. *Because Ciara is dying, because the dark cold wants me to stop...*

The ice-folk jammed and surged against the archway, in a panic hurry to take refuge far below in their many-levelled city. He raged at them, too. They were part of the cold, part of the pain. Because of them Ciara and Balin were dying. He sent the blade of force lancing among them, his hatred rising full tide to join the hatred of Ban Cruach that lodged in his mind.

Stab and cut and slash with the long terrible beam of brightness. They fell and fell, the hideous shining folk, and Stark sent the light of Ban Cruach's weapon sweeping through the tower itself, through the openings that were like windows in the stone.

Again and again, stabbing through those open slits as he ran. And suddenly the dark beam of force ceased to move. He tore out of it, and it did not follow him, remaining stationary as though fastened to the ice.

The battle of forces left his flesh. The pain was gone. He sped on to the tower.

He was close now. The withered bodies lay in heaps before the arch. The last of the ice-folk had forced their way inside.

Holding the sword level like a lance, Stark leaped in through the arch, into the tower.

THE SHINING ONES were dead where the destroying warmth had

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touched them. The flying spiral ribbons of ice were swept clean of them, the arching bridges and the galleries of that upper part of the tower.

They were dead along the ledge, under the control bank. They were dead across the mechanism that spun the frosty doom around Ciara and Balin. The whirling disc still hummed.

Below, in that stupendous well, the crowding ice-folk made a seething pattern of color on the narrow ways. But Stark turned his back on them and ran along the ledge, and in him was the heavy knowledge that he had come too late.

The frost had thickened around Ciara and Balin. It encrusted them like stiffened lace, and now their flesh was overlaid with a diamond shell of ice.

Surely they could not live!

He raised the sword to smite down at the whirling disc, to smash it, but there was no need. When the full force of that concentrated beam struck it, meeting the focus of shadow that it held, there was a violent flare of light and a shattering of crystal. The mechanism was silent.

The glooming veil was gone from around the ice-shelled man and woman. Stark forgot the creatures in the shaft below him. He turned the blazing sword full upon Ciara and Balin.

It would not affect the thin covering of ice. If the woman and the man were dead, it would not affect their flesh, any more than it had Ban Cruach's. But if they lived, if there was still a spark, a flicker beneath that frozen mail, the radiation would touch their blood with warmth, start again the pulse of life in their bodies.

He waited, watching Ciara's face. It was still as marble, and as white.

Something — instinct, or the warning mind of Ban Cruach that had learned a million years ago to beware the creatures of the ice—made him glance behind him.

Stealthy, swift and silent, up the winding ways they came. They had guessed that he had forgotten them in his anxiety. The sword was turned away from them now, and if they could take him from behind, stun him with the chill force of the sceptre-like rods they carried . . .

He slashed them with the sword. He saw the flickering beam go down and down the shaft, saw the bodies fall like drops of rain, rebounding here and there from the flying spans and carrying the living with them.

He thought of the many levels of the city. He thought of all the countless thousands that must inhabit them. He could hold them off in the shaft as long as he wished if he had no other need for the sword. But he knew that as soon as he turned his back they would be upon him again, and if he should once fall . . .

He could not spare a moment, or a chance.

He looked at Ciara, not knowing what to do, and it seemed to him that the sheathing frost had melted, just a little, around her face.

Desperately, he struck down again at the creatures in the shaft, and then the answer came to him.

He dropped the sword. The squat, round mechanism was beside him, with its broken crystal wheel. He picked it up.

It was heavy. It would have been heavy for two men to lift, but Stark was a driven man. Grunting, swaying with the effort, he lifted it and let it fall, out and down.

Like a thunderbolt it struck among those slender bridges, the spiderweb of icy strands that spanned the shaft. Stark watched it go, and listened to the brittle snapping of the ice, the final crashing of a million shards at the bottom far below.

He smiled, and turned again to Ciara, picking up the sword.

IT WAS HOURS LATER. Stark walked across the glowing ice of the valley, toward the cairn. The sword of Ban Cruach hung at his side. He had taken the talisman and replaced it in the boss, and he was himself again.

Ciara and Balin walked beside him. The color had come back into their faces, but faintly, and they were still weak enough to be glad of Stark's hands to steady them.

At the foot of the cairn they stopped, and Stark mounted it alone.

He looked for a long moment into the

face of Ban Cruach. Then he took the sword, and carefully turned the rings upon it so that the radiation spread out as it had before, to close the Gates of Death.

Almost reverently, he replaced the sword in Ban Cruach's hands. Then he turned and went down over the tumbled stones.

The shimmering darkness brooded still over the distant tower. Underneath the ice, the elfin city still spread downward. The shining ones would rebuild their bridges in the shaft, and go on as they had before, dreaming their cold dreams of ancient power.

But they would not go out through the Gates of Death. Ban Cruach in his rusty mail was still lord of the pass, the warder of the Norlands.

Stark said to the others, "Tell the story in Kushat. Tell it through the Norlands, the story of Ban Cruach and why he guards the Gates of Death. Men have forgotten. And they should not forget."

They went out of the valley then, the two men and the woman. They did not speak again, and the way out through the pass seemed endless.

Some of Ciara's chieftains met them at the mouth of the pass above Kushat. They had waited there, ashamed to return to the city without her, but not daring to go back into the pass again. They had seen the creatures of the valley, and they were still afraid.

They gave mounts to the three. They themselves walked behind Ciara, and their heads were low with shame.

They came into Kushat through the river gate, and Stark went with Ciara to the King City, where she made Balin follow too.

"Your sister is there," she said. "I have had her cared for."

The city was quiet, with the stullen apathy that follows after battle. The men of Mekh cheered Ciara in the streets. She rode proudly, but Stark saw that her face was gaunt and strained.

He, too, was marked deep by what he had seen and done, beyond the Gates of Death.

They went up into the castle.

Thanis took Balin into her arms, and

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wept. She had lost her first wild fury, and she could look at Ciara now with a restrained hatred that had a tinge almost of admiration.

"You fought for Kushat," she said, unwillingly, when she had heard the story. "For that, at least, I can thank you."

She went to Stark then, and looked up at him. "Kushat, and my brother's life..." She kissed him, and there were tears on her lips. But she turned to Ciara with a bitter smile.

"No one can hold him, any more than the wind can be held. You will learn that."

She went out then with Balin, and left Stark and Ciara alone, in the chambers of the king.

CIARA SAID, "The little one is very shrewd." She unbuckled the hauberk and let it fall, standing slim in her tunic of black leather, and walked to the tall windows that looked out upon the mountains. She leaned her head wearily against the stone.

"An evil day, an evil deed. And now I have Kushat to govern, with no reward of power from beyond the Gates of Death. How man can be misled!"

Stark poured wine from the flagon and brought it to her. She looked at him over the rim of the cup, with a certain wry amusement.

"The little one is shrewd, and she is right. I don't know that I can be as wise as she... Will you stay with me, Stark, or will you go?"

He did not answer at once, and she asked him, "What hunger drives you, Stark? It is not conquest, as it was with me. What are you looking for that you cannot find?"

He thought back across the years, back to the beginning—to the boy N'Chaka who had once been happy with Old One and little Tika, in the blaze and thunder and bitter frosts of a valley in the Twilight Belt of Mercury. He remembered how all that had ended, under the guns of the miners — the men who were his own kind.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't matter." He took her between his two hands, feeling the strength and the splendor of her, and it was oddly difficult to find words.

"I want to stay, Ciara. Now, this minute, I could promise that I would stay forever. But I know myself. You belong here, you will make Kushat your own. I don't. Someday I will go."

Ciara nodded. "My neck, also, was not made for chains, and one country was too little to hold me. Very well, Stark. Let it be so."

She smiled, and let the wine-cup fall.

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(Continued from p. 39)

movie had to be printed, why didn't you pick a good one, DESTINATION MOON, for instance? In regard to ROCKETSHIP X-M, I am quite positive that ANY Science-Fiction Actifan could have written, not only a better plot, but a much more accurate one.

The main fault of the picture is its extreme inaccuracy. I am including several examples of these technical errors.

1) The rocketship is hurtling through space, when they enter a meteor swarm. O.K. Now how the H— can meteors, rushing through space (a vacuum, by the way), make a whooshing noise as they pass the ship? (No sound in a vacuum).

2) Landing on Mars, the explorers are greeted by a terrific rainstorm. Sorry, but there isn't sufficient water vapor in Mars' atmosphere for a drizzle, let alone a downpour as in the picture.

3) Granting an atomic war on Mars thousands of years ago, the byproducts of an atomic blast are of an extremely short half-life. Definitely not fifty thousand years.

4) Why are the men horrible monsters, while the women look like something from a pulpzine cover (not the bem, either)? Since when do Martians wear such noticeable lipstick?

5) While still in space (outside of a gravitational field), a harmonica floats in the air. Good! Why then do papers and pencils on the desk (in addition to other assorted stuff), stay put? Hmmmmmm?

6) The ship was originally supposed to go to the moon (a distance of roughly 240,000 miles). How then did it have enough fuel to return to the earth from Mars, assuming that it could get anywhere near Mars? (Mars is roughly 238,000,000 miles from Earth at its greatest distance, and 35,000,000 miles at its closest approach to Earth. Assuming Mars to be about 100,000,000 miles from Earth at the time of the trip, and even this distance is less than average, Mars would still be 400,000,000 times further from Earth than the moon is, when both are at an average distance from our planet). (It—would—not!—Ed.)

These are a few of the many major, and innumerable minor errors in the picture.

A picture like this is what makes people think of Science-Fiction and fairy tales at the same time.

As an editor of ETAOIN SHRDLU (The Fan's Fanzine) 3/25¢, address inquiries to Taller, apt. 2F, 40 W. 77 St., N. Y., N. Y. (PLUG, PLUG, PLUG). I think that fans should protest pictures of this type, and demand pictures of the calibre of DESTINATION MOON.

By the way, I'm glad to see you go bi-monthly.

Yours truly,

STANLEY NATHANSON

GIBSON RIDES AGAIN

24 Kensington Ave.,
Jersey City 4, N. J.

DEAR JERRY:

What a sneaky way to get me to write you another letter! A winner, indeed! Okay, so you've got one more illo you can allocate to some fan group or other for a convention.



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PS's

FEATURE FLASH

Before we met Paul Anderson, we had pictured a formidable gent, some nine feet tall, hawk-eyed, sober and prematurely grey. Then he showed up in New York one day, and proved to be amicable, not quite nine feet tall, eagle-eyed, grinning and a blond. Moreover, on a spirited jaunt about town, he revealed a repertoire of brightly colored tales that matched, if not exceeded, your editor's. We respect a man like that.

Meet the author of DUEL ON SYRTIS:

An autobiography implies something worth autobiographing, which is lamentably lacking in this case. I really can't imagine readers working up much enthusiasm over my favorite brand of beer or the time our cow mistook a tractor for a bull. (Yes, it really happened.) However—

I was born in Pennsylvania late in 1926 of Scandinavian parents. Hence that first name, which, incidentally, has a pronunciation midway between "pole" and "powl." We soon moved to Port Arthur, Texas, where I did some of my growing among the oil refineries and Gulf coast shipping and acquired a younger brother. After my father's death we lived in Washington, D. C., for about a year—where my mother had a job with the Danish foreign office and I pottedter happily around the Smithsonian. But it really isn't a town fit to live in, so we took another jump and spent some years farming in Minnesota. It took that long for us to discover that you can't make a living off fifty acres, and quit. But at least it disabused me of any notions about the happy, simple outdoor life.

While studying physics at the University of Minnesota, I wrote a story and—it—*sold*. To anyone with my pathological hatred of regular hours that was a bugle call. But it took some time and several odd jobs—very odd, some of 'em—before I got to the point of making a living off writing alone. And no sooner had I reached that, than the good old academic life started calling me back. At present I'm working toward a master's degree and financing the project by writing. Combine long vacation trips, beer and books, *Wein, Weib, und Gesang*, and occasional pilgrimages back to the home town for some of my mother's roast goose and red cabbage, and it begins to look like an ideal existence. But by the time you read this, I'll probably be doing something else.

Special likes include bull sessions till all hours, camping in Western scenery, travel of all kinds (here and abroad), blondes, Greek literature and Shakespeare, brunettes, Mozart, redheads, and so on down the line. Favorite contemporary writer is Johannes V. Jensen, but I'm not going intellectual on you—I like the Saint and Li'l Abner just as well as you do.

Ambitions are to do a lot more traveling, write several novels and essays, learn classical Greek and Old Norse, own a seagoing sailboat, become a connoisseur of wine, get a doctor's degree in astrophysics, and spend the pipe-and-slippers stage of life on a peaceful mountaintop photographing remote galaxies. That's program enough to keep me busy for a while. Too bad one has to sleep.

But just for that, I refuse to mention what an enjoyable time I had last night with Craig's WITCH! She could've been a little more unprintable, of course—that lousy cover had her wearing too much clothes—but the sweet, little postal-regulated minds among us must be served. With garlic, preferably, and well-done!

Nor, by gad, shall I mention how deliciously chilling was Walton's NIGHTMARE—may he sleep horribly henceforth!

Nor will I breathe a whisper about the way Vestal out-did himself on those illos! Dunno what physical affects it had on the guy, but his work this ish was superbly nauseating. Such sweet drool!

We now strut cockily into that rooster's walk called, for some odd reason, The Vizigraph.

Messrs. Wickham and Blish jousted admirably on the field of dianetics. I perceive that I, too, have a few small cuts. But as my shield and I are borne from the melee, I raise myself to bloody elbow and observe that Blish rightfully termed my points hypothetical; and, further, he gives support to my unspoken contention that any dabbling we ignorant laymen do had best be hypothetical! A most enjoyable battle.

Then, Master Stewart had done a bit of research and set me to rights on Bushy's fool turtle. My thanks, Sire; forgive me that fault of relying on poor memory. It all happened so long ago, y'know—believe I was in Tortuga at the time—

Mr. Calkins' profound epistle, which ironically befits a sage of old Athens, touches upon a festering sore of mine. He is repelled by the covers on the lurid pulps and ashamed to be seen on the street with same. Many readers have expressed like comments.

In most cases, these objectors say it's the covers they dislike. In some cases, they admit that it's the sneering regard of the populace they cringe from.

However, you and I know that pornography sells well. I think there's a reason for it. Perhaps the fellows are tired of getting tongue-tied every time a shapely lass stops to straighten her hems; perhaps the girls are tired of feeling embarrassed every time there's a brisk wind. The urge, is pleasant and enjoyable—and damnably frustrating if you've been taught from childhood that it's indecent. And, of course, along come the movies, the theater, and popular fiction preaching that romance is when the guy wants what the gal has and the gal knows it.

Sexy pornography breeds familiarity. The Old School will argue that it breeds indulgence, like the meek, little man who reads murder mysteries and then tears somebody's throat out in a dark alley. (Shall we go for a stroll, Jerry?) (Oh, let's! Just you, and meek, little me!—Ed.) But maybe the guys prefer to enjoy the sight of milady's flesh with the calmness of familiarity; maybe the gals want a little enjoyment, too, without feeling self-conscious about it. And there's a vague rumor about that guys and dolls sometimes get married simply because they have a hell of a good time together and want to raise a couple of kids.

In short, while we worry about what people will think—who says they *think*? Pah! A curse on 'em!

I am moved to remind some sweet, innocent

fans of the not-so-good old days of stf, when the public thought it to be mere "Buck Rogers" foolishness—rocket ships, rayguns, crazy things that could never happen. A few crazy things have happened, somewhat altering that opinion.

Altering it enough, in fact, so that groups of fans meeting need not remove themselves to localities where the juke-box is there, the bar is there, our table between, and here comes the double-breasted saloonkeeper's daughter. As I recall, she was rather hideous in the light of day.

Ye Olde Methuselah,

JOE GIBSON

FAN BITES FAN

942 Scribner St.,
Grand Rapids, Mich.

DEAR JEROME:

This following letter, while it undoubtedly will be extremely unpopular, is, however, a sincere attempt to define what I consider to be a malign influence in science-fiction today. I am speaking of the driveling adolescents who feel it their duty to send you their nauseous comments on *PLANET STORIES*, its fiction and writers.

While examining the *VIZIGRAPH* column throughout several issues, I found a remarkable dialectic evident in the styles of writing. From mere listing of stories and their ignorant reactions, I found this detestable childswarm soon advancing psychopathological humor. This took—and is taking—the form of sly parenthetical inserts, senseless exclamations of their own contrivance and inane plays on words. I also find evidences of cultist leanings among your 'regular contributors'; and much to my horror, I found that these same humorists that defile the pages of *PS* are held in high regard by science-fiction devotees. Certain fan magazines actually go out of their way to make a favorable impression on people (?) (I'm sorry that I resorted to one of their tricks) like Rick Sneary, Boggs, Stewart, Carter and that whole tight little clique of bully boys. And I'm sorry to see the letters that these grubs throw out from beneath their rocks are printed so often.

I have a picture in my mind as to how these flabby pseudo-intellectuals operate. I have no doubt that they come from the slightly lower middle-class; they were more or less good students—and while they were attending high school, they decided to attach themselves onto a cult just sufficiently out of the way so that they could be considered *slightly* different, but still have cohorts in "other rooms." I consider them mostly parasitical dilettantes who have nothing to give s-f!

Unfortunately, this lunatic fringe has always, and probably will always, place their suckers on any art form and go along for the ride; hindering the artists at every turn or development he (the artist) chooses to make. Of course, I realize how true the statement is that all generalizations are wrong—including this one, and there are some contributors to your letter column who have developed some intelligent critical faculty. These people who have studied science, fiction and science-fiction have a great deal to offer s-f magazines like *PLANET*. But I see one intelligent letter to five meaningless excrecences which are meant to be taken by the editor as witty sallies—but expressing Profound Ideas.

I am constantly appalled by these idiots' childish scrawls; these senseless praising and damn-

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ing of an author, whose work—though read, I admit—is completely misunderstood. They seem to like—say—Ray Bradbury or dislike Ray Bradbury; having no reason in the world nor any right to, as they always misunderstand Ray Bradbury. Their ignorance of scientific concepts is only surpassed by their ignorance of literary form. And yet they have the gall, cowardly as it is, to praise and condemn stories and ideas that are obviously way above their heads. The typographical hy-jinks of a leech like Ackerman (whose sole talent lies in exploiting writers) or a moronic snob like Sneary (Dickens couldn't have improved that name—doesn't it remind you of a sniffling pimply-faced adolescent?) deserve only the contempt of writers, editors and serious critics of science-fiction.

As a good friend of Isaac Asimov, I am a little distressed that you continue to spell Izomiv's name incorrectly, and I don't blame Isaac a bit for complaining. Since Asimov has really advanced in the field of s-f, I think it only fitting that you should make an attempt to spell Isaac's name right. It should be spelled—Izak Isamoff and no other way. Asack and I will be grateful if you do.

Sincerely yours,

DENNIS STRONG

The gauntlet is flung... and with fierce cries of "Pax! Pax!" your editor slams down his visor, levels his lance, and gallops to the safety of the sidelines. Brother, leave us out of this!

GOOEY GALAXIES

2711 La Salle Street
Racine, Wisconsin

DEAR JERRY:

Well, well, well, well well, well, well! Whadaya know—I won an original. And 1st place, too—Great Globules of Goopy Galaxies! But really, my sincere thanks to everyone who voted for me, and may you all win a pic too someday.

And now—brace yourself, J. B.—and now, I am about to make a statement which, so far as I know, has never before been even hinted at in these hallowed pages throughout the entire 3¼ volumes of PLANET's annals (Are you ready, Jerry? Do you have all 10 of your gorgeous blonde secretaries propping you up and standing by with an assortment of vitamin capsules, aspirins, and Lydia Pinkham's Pills? All right, then, here goes:—) I LIKED PLANET's COVER THIS ISSUE! I repeat: I liked PLANET's cover this issue. (The dull "thump" heard in the background was our beloved editor falling flat on his face.) (While 9 gorgeous blonde secretaries look on in horror—Ed.) Just why I liked the cover I'm not quite sure, perhaps because it bears a slight resemblance to the title story, altho I don't remember Mr. Coppel mentioning that our hero had a yellow carcass and green face. But then, I suppose one must allow one's illustrator a little leeway, mustn't one?

I liked the stories too. Coppel's THE LAST TWO ALIVE would have been excellent except for two things: the epilogue was entirely unnecessary, as it was apparent from the middle of the story that this was another Adam-and-Eve yarn; in fact it would have been much better if the Adam-and-Eve business had been left out altogether since this theme has been worked thru

seven hells already in the past few years. Aside from that Coppel is moving up rapidly. He rather reminds me of McDowell, whom I consider one of PS's best writers, altho he is a bit more subtle than Emmett about having the heroine take off her clothes. (By the way, would whoever hacked out the blurb for this story please explain to me the nature of a "beast rocket"?)

For once your blurbs about an author were correct. I enjoyed immensely C. H. Liddell's CARRY ME HOME. His style is fascinating and holding and he—kwote—writes with uncommon power and clarity—unkwote. I didn't appreciate his story in the Fall issue too much, but CARRY ME HOME was exceptional. I guess Liddell just has to grow on you. It's too bad Red Rohan was killed off to all practical purposes; I would liked to have seen (gad, what a triumph in tense that was) more of him in this blessed bi-monthly.

Well, Mitkey really did ride again. The science in the story was null, but when a good belly laugh (plural) is concerned, who cares about science! (Oh, how I wish some of my profs believed that.) This tale wasn't quite as good as its predecessor, but it was still simply great. With the recent atomic-holocaust type of story finally being laid in its grave, science-fiction needs many more of the Mitkey and Science-by-ear-Gallegher tales. Also, I hope MITKEY RIDES AGAIN served another purpose by setting a precedent for more illustrations per story? Maybe? Huh?

Best of the shorts (stories that is) was MacDonald's FINAL MISSION. The picture of the unwanted heroes entering the spaceship was so well described by the author that it brings this story up to the head of the issue. MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA was good too, except that the "Finagle Factor" used by Lt. Kim in college does not work—I speak from experience! The other two tales were fair—that's all, just fair.

Egad, but the Vizigraph was dull this issue. No race riots, no religious feuds, no challenges to duels. Oh well, this can't last long, Sneary's bound to start something pretty soon. While we're waiting, give pics to Sigler, Gibson, and Mitchette. Aside to Professor Sam Sackett of Hastings College: I really did write my theme for English (got an "A" too), but I had to stay up half the night doing it.

In conclusion may I cry that I simply slobber—whoops—slaver in anticipation of your forthcoming sooper-sexy novel of the space-wolves: "Whispering Werewinds of Wilma's Weasel-World." Hurry, Hurry! I can't stand this suspense much longer.

Stfancercely,

BRUCE HAPKE

Letter-hacks, please note: From now on, as a result of the new bi-monthly schedule, La Viz will be running one issue behind—which means that the next issue of PS (May) will contain your letters pertaining to the last issue (January), and so on... exceptions are those letters dashed off by midnight oil, as soon as each PS hits the stands.

Our apologies for offering such an abbreviated Vizigraph this trip; with it, we offer the above as explanation. Now, with Beale safely on his Worple and his way, we'll say a rivederci until March 1st...

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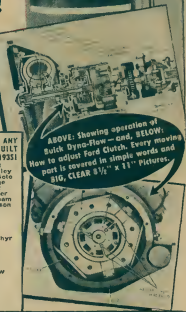
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